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Rupee trades in red on 1st day of New Year

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Tobacco, pan masala to become expensive from 1 Feb

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

The Centre has notified 1 February as the date from which additional excise duty on tobacco products and a health cess on pan masala will come into force, replacing the existing GST compensation cess on these so-called "sin goods".

This will make cigarettes, cigars, cheroots, hookah and chewing tobacco even more expensive.

According to Finance Ministry notifications issued late on 31 December, 2025, a health and national security cess, along with excise duty, will be levied on pan masala and tobacco products over and above the 40 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST).

In the case of biris, the additional levy will apply on top of the 18 per cent GST rate.

- Gutkha will attract an additional excise duty of 91 per cent, while chewing tobacco and jarda scented tobacco will be taxed at 82 per cent each.

The government has also introduced a new MRP-based valuation mechanism for tobacco products such as chewing tobacco, filter khaini, jarda scented tobacco and gutkha.

Under the new system, the GST value will be calculated on the basis of the retail sale price declared on the package.

Gutkha will attract an additional excise duty of 91 per cent, while chewing tobacco and jarda scented tobacco will be taxed at 82 per cent each. Cigarettes will be taxed based on length and filter, with rates ranging from Rs 2,050 to Rs 8,500 per 1,000 sticks. Proceeds from the excise duty will be shared with states in line with Finance Commission recommendations, with 41 per cent of collections forming part of the divisible pool. *—PTI*

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Only 90 of 3,000 Kogilu evictees to get houses

Govt had said 'genuine' homeless residents will be given relief

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

Urban Development Minister Byrathi Suresh on Thursday said only 90 families evicted from Faqir Colony in Kogilu Layout are eligible for compensatory housing, rejecting claims that as many as 400 families, estimated at around 3,000 people, would be accommodated.

The clarification comes days after the Karnataka government, on 29 December, announced alternate accommodation for "genuine" homeless residents whose illegally built houses or sheds were demolished during a recent drive in north Bengaluru. Addressing the media, Suresh said a joint survey by officials from the Urban Development and Social Welfare departments found that only 90 residents were local and eligible. "Only those who belong to the city and are genuine beneficiaries will be given houses," he said.

The Opposition BJP, however, warned of protests in Bengaluru on 5 January if what it termed an "illegal allotment" went ahead. Yelahanka BJP MLA SR Vishwanath alleged irregularities, claiming that several people who deposited Rs 1 lakh a year ago were yet to receive houses as construction remained incomplete.

He said beneficiaries under the Rajiv Gandhi Awas Yojana must have an annual income below Rs three lakh, have lived in Bengaluru for at least five years, and possess a domicile certificate—none of which, he claimed, had been issued in Faqir Layout.

Vishwanath further alleged that applicants who applied six years ago were still waiting, while recent applicants were being considered, and said the BJP would challenge the allotment in court and raise the issue with the Governor.

Adding to the criticism, Yeshwanthpur MLA ST Somashekar questioned why Kogilu residents were being charged Rs 2.5 lakh, compared with Rs 10.5 lakh elsewhere. He alleged the concessions—partly funded by the civic body and the Minority Welfare Board—were illegal.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar dismissed the controversy, saying attempts were being made to disturb peace and that the police were ensuring law and order. *—PTI*

Rubble lies scattered as families live in tents after the government demolished over 200 houses in Kogilu near Yelahanka in Bengaluru **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

The blaze broke out at Le Constellation bar amid New Year celebrations , transforming the popular ski and golf resort into a venue of Switzerland's worst tragedies in recent years **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

40 killed as blast rips through Swiss resort

CRANS-MONTANA, 1 JAN

A fire tore through a packed New Year celebration at a bar in the Swiss Alpine resort of Crans-Montana less than two hours after midnight on Thursday, killing dozens of people and injuring around 100 others, police said.

Swiss authorities have not yet confirmed the exact death toll, but the Italian Foreign Ministry said at least 40 people were killed. Police cautioned that the figure could change as rescue and recovery efforts continue.

The blaze broke out at Le Constellation bar, transforming the popular ski and golf resort from a festive venue into the scene of what could be one of Switzerland's worst tragedies in recent years. Valais Canton police commander Frederic Gisler said "several tens of people" were presumed dead. Emergency services, including helicopters and ambulances, rushed to the scene to assist victims, some of whom were foreign nationals. Many of the injured were taken to nearby hospitals. Authorities said efforts were under way to identify the victims though the process would take time. However, Valais Canton Attorney General Beatrice Pilloud said there was "at no moment any question of an attack". *—PTI*

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India to host BRICS in 2026 amid global tensions

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

India has officially assumed the rotating presidency of the BRICS grouping for 2026, intending to emphasise inclusive development and elevate the Global South's concerns in global economic discussions. The move comes amidst increased trade uncertainty following significant tariffs imposed by former US President Donald Trump. India aims to strike a cautious balance on currency issues and promote local currency settlements while advocating for reforms in multilateral institutions. ***—Agencies***

With 'machine', UP cops declare man as Bangladeshi

GHAZIABAD, 1 JAN

A bizarre video from purportedly from Ghaziabad shows an Uttar Pradesh Police officer claiming to detect a person's nationality using a "machine" has gone viral. In the clip, the officer places what appears to be a mobile phone on a man's back and declares, "This machine shows you are from Bangladesh." The man repeatedly insists he is from Araria in Bihar, but the officer remains unconvinced. Social media users questioned the legality, logic and scientific basis of the act, calling it harassment and misuse of authority. Police officials have not yet issued a clarification or announced action. ***—Agencies***

Mamdani sworn in as New York City's 1st Muslim Mayor

NEW YORK, 1 JAN

Zohran Mamdani was sworn in as New York City's 112th Mayor in a private ceremony at the historic Old City Hall subway station just after midnight on New Year's Day. At 34, he became the first South Asian and Muslim to lead the US's largest city and its second-youngest mayor. Mamdani took the oath on a Quran from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, highlighting inclusion and civic engagement. Born in Kampala, Uganda, he moved to New York at age seven and became a naturalised US citizen in 2018. ***— PTI***

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ED freezes WinZO's Rs 192 cr assets

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has raided the accounting firm of real-money gaming app WinZO, freezing fresh bank deposits, mutual funds, and fixed deposits worth Rs 192 crore. The search, conducted on 30 December, targeted ZO Games Pvt Ltd, the fully owned Indian subsidiary of WinZO Pvt Ltd. The ED alleges the company engaged in "criminal" practices by using bots, AI, and software to simulate games without informing users, generating Rs 177 crore in illicit proceeds between May 2024 and August 2025. Earlier raids had frozen Rs 505 crore.*— PTI*

K'taka to hold all local body polls in 2026

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

State Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Thursday said the Congress government has taken a pledge to conduct all pending local body elections across the State in 2026, asserting its commitment to democratic processes and grassroots governance.

"In 2026, the Congress party has taken a pledge to hold all local body polls in the State," Shivakumar, who is also the State Congress President, told reporters. He said the government would work to ensure peace, happiness and positive change for citizens in the new year.

Recently, Shivakumar had indicated that Zilla Panchayat and Taluk Panchayat elections would need to be held within the next two to three months and asked party leaders to begin preparations. He announced that application forms for aspirants seeking Congress tickets for elections to five city corporations under the Greater Bengaluru Authority have been released.

Claiming the government delivered good governance in 2025, Shivakumar said key achievements such as the Global Investors Meet, the Bengaluru Tech Summit, fulfilment of electoral promises and major irrigation decisions. *—PTI*

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NEW YEAR, NEW HOPE

Children light candles and offer prayers at St Mary's Basilica in Shivajinagar, Bengaluru, as the New Year dawns, seeking hope & blessings on the first day of 2026 **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD** ***>>>MORE ON P2***

INDORE DEATH TOLL UNCLEAR AS LOCALS, CM CITE DIFFERENT FIGURES

INDORE, 1 JAN

Conflicting reports continue over the number of deaths caused by contaminated water in Indore. Residents claim 13 fatalities, including a six-month-old child, while Chief Minister Mohan Yadav put the toll at four, and the city Mayor reported seven deaths.

The outbreak began last week in the Bhagirathpura area, with cases of diarrhoea and vomiting reported. According to The Wire, around 2,000 people have fallen ill.

Officials, however, said preliminary assessments indicate that drainage water entered the drinking water pipeline due to leakage, contaminating the municipal supply.

Urban Development and Housing Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya stated that 1,400–1,500 people were affected, with around 200 hospitalised. He added that patients admitted to hospitals were now recovering and being discharged.

The Chief Medical and Health Officer's office conducted a survey of 7,992 houses and examined nearly 39,854 residents, identifying 2,456 suspected cases. Of 212 admitted patients, 162 remain hospitalised. *—PTI*

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NO REGARDS FOR SAFETY

AI flies Boeing Dreamliners despite snags, gets DGCA notice

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

India's aviation regulator has issued show-cause notices to Air India pilots over alleged serious safety violations after they operated Boeing 787 Dreamliner flights despite repeated technical snags and system warnings.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has warned of strict action and asked the cockpit crew to submit their replies within 14 days.

According to the notice dated 29 December, the action relates to operations on the Delhi–Tokyo sector, involving flights AI-357 to Tokyo and AI-358 on the return leg.

An Air India source confirmed receipt of the notice, describing it as the second such communication from the regulator concerning this route.

The DGCA noted that during one flight, the crew received multiple system alerts and detected a smell resembling smoke near one of the aircraft doors. In another instance, technical issues related to heating and cooling systems, covered under the Minimum Equipment List (MEL), led to the diversion of a flight to Kolkata. Regulatory records show that the aircraft, registered VT-ANI, had experienced similar technical problems on at least five previous flights, indicating a recurring mechanical issue. The faults were also reported on other sectors earlier. *—Agencies*

1.3 cr migrants removed from UP voter rolls

LUCKNOW, 1 JAN

Permanent migration has emerged as the leading cause of discrepancies in Uttar Pradesh's electoral rolls, accounting for nearly 1.30 crore of the 2.88 crore uncollectable enumeration forms identified during the Special Intensive Revision. Official data up to 27 December, 2025, shows that permanently shifted voters make up 8.40 per cent of the total electorate.

Election officials said large-scale inter-district and inter-state migration, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, has driven the trend. Untraceable or absent voters form the second largest category, with 79.52 lakh cases (5.15 per cent), mainly due to temporary migration, frequent address changes and incorrect details. Deaths of registered voters accounted for 46.23 lakh cases (2.99 per cent), reflecting outdated entries, especially in rural areas. Another 25.47 lakh voters (1.65 per cent) were found enrolled elsewhere, while 7.74 lakh cases (0.50 per cent) fell under other reasons.

Urban districts such as Gautam Buddh Nagar, Ghaziabad, Lucknow, Kanpur Nagar, Agra and Varanasi recorded the highest number of uncollectable forms, while border districts reported more untraceable voters. *—PTI*

Hindu man attacked, set on fire in Bangladesh

DHAKA, 1 JAN

A Hindu businessman in Bangladesh was allegedly attacked by a mob, seriously injured, and set on fire in Shariatpur's Damudya region on New Year's Eve. This is the fourth such attack on the minority community in the past two weeks Reportedly, the victim, 50-year-old Khokon Chandra Das, runs a pharmacy and mobile banking business. On Wednesday around 9.30pm, after closing his shop, Das was returning home in an autorickshaw when assailants stopped the vehicle, attacked him with sharp weapons, poured petrol over him, and set him alight. To save himself, he jumped into a nearby pond. Locals rescued him and took him to hospital. Police identified two suspects, Rabbi and Sohag. *—ANI*

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PHOTO: X

Assailants throw drugs, phones into Hindalga jail

BELAGAVI, 1 JAN

The unidentified miscreants allegedly threw drugs and mobile phones into the inner compound of Hindalga Jail from outside and fled the spot. According to sources, the incident occurred around 3am, when masked individuals arrived near the Hindalga Jail premises in Belagavi district and tossed packets containing drugs and mobile phones into the jail compound. The entire act was captured on CCTV cameras. The case falls under the jurisdiction of the Belagavi Rural Police Station. Police officials have launched an investigation. Home Minister G Parameswara said he has spoken to DG Prisons Alok Kumar in this regard. "He will be visiting Belagavi, Kalaburagi and other places," the minister said. *—Salar News*

Nitte Education Trust Chairman Hegde dies

MANGALURU, 1 JAN

Dr N Vinay Hegde, 86, Chairman of the Nitte Education Institutions Group, passed away early Thursday at his residence in Kadri Shivabhag, Mangaluru. The son of former Supreme Court judge KS Hegde and the younger brother of former Lokayukta Justice Santosh Hegde, Vinay had been suffering from age related illness. A native of Nitte in Karkala taluk of Udupi district, he had been conferred the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award and an honorary doctorate from Mangalore University for his contribution to education and social services. *—Salar News*

After blast, GBA gives PGs 7 days to comply with norms

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

After a suspected LPG cylinder blast in the City killed one person, the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) has directed all Service Apartments, Hostels & PGs in the Bengaluru East City Corporation to inspect their premises and ensure compliance to norms. In a circular, the GBA gave all establishments seven days to ensure that only authorised LPG/gas connections are present. They must also ensure proper fire and electrical safety systems and that all the valid licences are in place. After the deadline, the circular said officials will inspect premises. If any lapses are found, authorities may impose penalties Greater Bengaluru Authority Act, 2024, seal the premise, take legal action or suspend trade licenses. The GBA stressed that this was being done to prevent any future blast. An IT worker died in the blast on Monday. *—Salar News*

Murders, accidents mar 1st day of year

From drunken crashes to marital killings and tragic suicide, K'taka saw blood on 1 Jan

People celebrate New Year's with fervour; Devotees perform pooja at Dodda Ganapathi temple, Basavanagudi in City; Mysuru Palace was lit up with 15 minutes of grand fireworks; Christians attend special prayers at St Mary's Basilica Church, Shivajinagar in Bengaluru on Thursday

PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ASAD/SALAR

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

The State saw a series of murders, murders, suicides, and accident cases on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. At least 12 people were killed in separate incidents across the State.

VIJAYANAGAR MAN HACKS WIFE

A man in Vijayanagara district allegedly hacked his wife to death with an axe after a prolonged marital dispute and attempted to flee the scene. However, four hours later, police attested accused Selvakumar, a resident of Amaravati in Hosapete, Vijayanagara district.

HUBBALLI MAN STRANGLES WIFE

A man in Hubballi allegedly strangled his wife to death, suspecting that she was having an illicit affair.

Police have launched a manhunt for accused Mehboob Paniband.

This was the second marriage for both Mehboob and his wife Anjuma.

AUTO DRIVER STABBED TO DEATH IN CITY

A man was allegedly brutally stabbed in front of his house, which falls under KP Agrahara police station limits in the City.

The deceased, Rechanna, was an auto-rickshaw driver. He is believed to have consumed alcohol before going home after completing his night duties.

As he stepped out of his house, miscreants attacked him from behind and stabbed him in the back before fleeing. Rechanna died on the spot. Police are searching for the accused.

YOUTH MURDERED FOR 'HARASMENT'

A man was murdered for allegedly harassing an engaged woman by repeatedly messaging her on Instagram. The incident occurred near Attiganalu village in Tarikere taluk of Chikkamagaluru district.

The deceased, Manjunath, 21, had been messaging a young woman whom he knew, despite being told to stop. The woman told her fiancé, Venu, who then called Manjunath for a discussion.

However, an argument broke out and during the ensuing fight, Venu allegedly stabbed Manjunath.

MAN'S HEAD SMASHED WITH STONE

A man, returning home to Haveri after performing his father's last rites, was allegedly murdered by his own friend. The accused, Shivakumar Shivapur, allegedly smashed his friend, Manjunath Muddanavar's, 30, head with a stone during a quarrel, killing him. Manjunath's father died on 30 December and the two friends reportedly had consumed alcohol before the fight broke out.

3 DIE IN GADAG ACCIDENT

Three people died on the spot in a horrific collision when a car reportedly hit a divider on NH-63 and then rammed into a Goan transport bus in Gadag district. The accident occurred near Harlapur village in Gadag taluk. Several others sustained injuries.

GIRL DIES BY SUICIDE IN CITY

A teenage girl allegedly died by suicide in Bengaluru, reportedly distressed over not receiving love from her parents. Lekhana, 17, allegedly died by hanging in her mother's house. Her parents were staying separately owing to family disputes.

She reportedly failed her Class 10 examinations. In her suicide note, she reportedly wrote that she was not receiving love from her parents, felt lonely, and that she alone was responsible for her death.

MAN DIES IN BIKE ACCIDENT IN CITY

A young man died on the spot in a tragic road accident while riding his bike at high speed after New Year celebrations Cunningham Road in Bengaluru.

The deceased, Sharath, was driving a Royal Enfield at a high speed when it crashed into a temple wall. He died on the spot.

2 WOMEN DIE AFTER FALLING INTO RAICHUR CANAL

Two women lost their lives after accidentally slipping and falling into a canal near Aane Hosur in Lingsugur taluk of Raichur district.

The deceased, Eeramma, 35; and Devamma, 30, from Nanjaladinni village in Maski taluk had gone to the Narayanapura right bank canal to wash their hands and legs. Police have retrieved their bodies. *—Salar News*

In 2026, Dr G expects a political promotion

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

Home Minister Dr G Parameshwara on Thursday said he expects a "political promotion" pending the Congress High Command's decision. He also hinted about his Chief Ministerial aspirations, asserting he too has ambitions.

The senior leader, who had served as state Congress chief in the past, had in November said that he too was in the race to become the CM, amid a power tussle between Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar.

"The political promotion should happen in (2026). It is left to our High Command," Parameshwara told reporters. "I have lived so far as an optimist, so it is not something new to me. Don't you have (ambition) to become something in life. A human should have ambition, if not he is not human."

"When I joined politics, I had an ambition to become MLA and Minister. From each step there will be a desire to go one more step ahead, but it is all left to our High Command," he added.

Members of Siddaramaiah's camp have said that if there were to be a change, Parameshwara should take over and become the State's first Dalit CM. *—PTI*

DKS announces slew of infra projects

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Wednesday announced a series of major infrastructure and urban development projects planned in the City, saying the initiatives would significantly reshape the Bengaluru's future and find place in history books.

"Within the BDA limits, various projects planned by the State government will find place in the history books," Shivakumar said.

He said the 120-km Peripheral Ring Road, also known as the Bengaluru Business Corridor, has already been notified. "We are collecting details from the farmers for the realisation of the project. Money has also been finalised."

The Deputy Chief Minister said the government has also decided to develop small townships, with a substantial commercial component. "They will have 35 per cent of the land as commercial. The price offered will be way beyond their expectation".

DyCM DK Shivakunar, Minister Byrathi Suresh, and BDA Chairman NA Haris inaugurate the Hebbal Loop flyover connecting Ballari Road to Mekhri Circle, in Bengaluru on Thursday

PHOTO: SALAR

Shivakumar announced that a 1.5-km cut-and-cover tunnel will be built by the BDA.

"This will join Mehkri Circle from its left and right side connecting a flyover there," he said, adding that the project is aimed at easing traffic congestion.

He further said a flyover is being planned along the Outer Ring Road, connecting the Tumakuru side to KR Puram, to improve City-wide connectivity.

Referring to land issues involving the Karnataka Industrial Area Development Board (KIADB) and Nandi Infrastructure Corridor Enterprises (NICE), Shivakumar said the government would find alternatives to land parcels under litigation. "NICE people think that they are bigger than the government. We will find a way for them. I know how to teach them a lesson".

He said the government had sought a no-objection certificate from NICE.

Shivakumar also noted that a BDA land parcel has been finalised for a skydeck project.

"BDA will be building skydeck because Bengaluru has funnel problem. So till the place we have got clearance by the Airport Authority of India, we will build skydeck," he said. *—PTI*

25 IAS, IPS officers transferred in 3 districts

MYSURU, 1 JAN

In a major administrative reshuffle, the government ordered the transfer of 25 senior IAS and IPS officers, including the police chiefs of Mysuru, Chamarajanagar, and Mandya.

In an order issued on Wednesday, the State announced several key police leadership changes. Mysuru Superintendent of Police (SP) Vishnuvardhan has been promoted to Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) and appointed as Director of the State Police Academy in Mysuru.

Replacing Vishnuvardhan as Mysuru SP is Mallikarjuna Baladandi, previously SP in Mandya. IPS officer V J Shobharani has been appointed SP for Mandya, while Mysuru Deputy Commissioner (DCP)of Police R N Bindu Mani has been transferred as SP of Kodagu.

In Chamarajanagar, the government transferred DC Shilpa Nag and appointed Roopa as the new DC. Chamarajanagar Superintendent of Police B T Kavitha has been transferred to the Bengaluru Crime Investigation Department (CID). N Mutturaj, previously DCP of Mysuru, has been appointed as the new SP of Chamarajanagar. *—Salar News*

Air Marshal Shrinivas takes charge as IAF Training Command AOC

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

Air Marshal Seethepalli Shrinivas has assumed the role of Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C) of the Indian Air Force's Training Command. A graduate of the National Defence Academy, Air Marshal Shrinivas was commissioned in the fighter stream of the IAF on 13 June 1987. He is a 'Category A' Qualified Flying Instructor with over 4,200 hours of flight experience on various aircraft, including the MiG-21 and Iskra.

His extensive career includes numerous command positions, such as Commandant of the Air Force Academy and Air Officer Commanding of a frontline fighter base on the Western border. Additionally, he served as the Commanding Officer of the Flying Instructors' School. *—PTI*

STRAY BEATEN TO DEATH

Dog bites 21 people in 1.5 hours in Kolar

KOLAR, 1 JAN

A stray dog bit and injured as many as 21 people in just one and a half hours on Wednesday near a Kolar RTO office, Byre Gowda layout and nearby areas on Wednesday. Eventually, the public chased the dog, beating it to death with sticks and stones. It is not yet known whether the dog was rabid or a normal stray.

Around noon, the dog suddenly attacked people moving near the RTO office and nearby areas, biting the people moving on the road and standing near their houses.

The injured were rushed to the SNR Hospital Kolar, where they were administered anti-rabies vaccines. Witnesses said the dog ran from place to place on the biting spree.

On receiving news about the incident, CMC Commissioner Naveen Chandra contacted his KGF counterpart and requested him to send the team of dog catchers, but before the team arrived in Kolar the irate public had killed the dog.

Dr Jagadish, District Surgeon at SNR Hospital, Kolar said some of the victims told him that the dog was dumped in a drain. Because the dog was killed, he was unsure if it was rabid.

Luckily, most of the victims were adults an no child was bitten, said Narayanaswamy of Byre Gowda layout in Kolar.

There are nearly one lakh dogs in Kolar district, including about twenty thousand pet dogs.

Deputy Commissioner Ravi MR said that district administration had drawn up a plan to set up shelter houses for the stray dogs in the district, while shelter houses will be set up near the Solid Waste Management units.

He said the district administration would follow the Supreme Court guidelines and the SOP prescribed by the Animal Welfare Board.

However, V Shivareddy of Bangarpet said authorities are not implementing the apex court's guidelines. *—Salar News*

JUSTICE D'CUNHA REPORT

Covid irregularities report submitted to govt

BENGALURU, 1 JAN

Karnataka's judicial inquiry into alleged irregularities during the Covid-19 pandemic reached a milestone on Wednesday with Justice John Michael D'Cunha submitting his final report to the government.

Chief Secretary Shalini Rajneesh received the report in the presence of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. The commission, constituted in August 2023 and headed by the retired High Court judge, probed the procurement of medicines, medical equipment and alleged oxygen supply mismanagement during the previous BJP government.

The inquiry examined procurement worth Rs 106 crore, including Rs 63.8 crore in Bengaluru Urban district, and covered Covid-19 management in Bengaluru Urban and Belagavi districts. The government order instituting the commission cited serious concerns raised by the Public Accounts Committee in its July–August 2023 report, which flagged alleged lapses in procurement and oxygen supply that reportedly led to deaths.

Justice Michael D'Cunha submits the report on irregularities in medical equipment procurement during Covid-19 to CM Siddaramaiah and Chief Secretary Shalini Rajneesh

PHOTO: ANI

In his submission letter, Justice D'Cunha noted that the report had not been made public, but said the government may consider releasing it "at the earliest" given the need for transparency and reforms.

The Congress-led government has accused the previous BJP regime of large-scale irregularities in Covid-19 management. The BJP has dismissed the inquiry as politically motivated. Former health minister K Sudhakar earlier alleged that the government had bypassed the Lokayukta, calling the probe a "political vindictive approach" aimed at securing a report to suit its needs.

- The government order instituting the commission cited serious lapses in procurement and oxygen supply that reportedly led to deaths. However, the BJP claimed the report was a political vendetta

Rejecting the charge, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said the government was not pursuing vendetta politics but accountability. "We want justice. Thirty-six people died due to lack of oxygen. Should we not investigate?" *—Agencies*

PHOTO: PTI

Murmu hails AI's role in positive social change

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

President Droupadi Murmu has hailed Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a "big opportunity" for fostering positive societal change, emphasising the importance of ensuring its benefits reach all sections of society, particularly the underprivileged. Speaking at a programme organised by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, she highlighted AI's role as a critical growth driver for India's economy, predicting significant contributions to GDP and productivity."AI should be utilised for reducing societal, economic and technological barriers," the President stated. *—PTI*

RSS chief opposes judging people by caste, wealth

RAIPUR, 1 JAN

Mohan Bhagwat, the chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has urged that individuals should not be judged by caste, wealth, or language, asserting that "the entire country belongs to everyone." Speaking at the Hindu Sammelan in Sonpairi village, Raipur, Bhagwat emphasised that social harmony begins with dispelling feelings of separation and discrimination. Bhagwat called for open access to temples and public facilities for all, framing this collective approach as an effort of unity rather than conflict. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Air Marshal Kapoor takes over as IAF vice chief

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Air Marshal Nagesh Kapoor took charge as the Vice Chief of the Air Staff on Thursday, succeeding Air Marshal Narmdeshwar Tiwari, who retired after four decades of service. Previously, he served as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the South Western Air Command. Commissioned into the Flying Branch of the Indian Air Force in December 1986, Air Marshal Kapoor has extensive experience operating various fighter and trainer aircraft. He assumed office at Vayu Bhawan in New Delhi, where he was honoured with a Guard of Honour. Following the ceremony, he laid a wreath at the National War Memorial, paying tribute to the armed forces personnel who sacrificed their lives in service to the nation. *—PTI*

Mamata vows not to bow before 'malevolent forces'

TMC chief extends greetings to workers on Foundation Day

PHOTO: PTI

KOLKATA, 1 JAN

Extending greetings on TMC's Foundation Day, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said the TMC would continue to fight for the people and would not bow before "malevolent forces."

Banerjee said the core guiding principle of the party's "historic journey" was the honour of the motherland, the development of Bengal and the protection of democratic rights.

She said the party's journey began on 1 January 1998, with the aim of serving 'Maa Mati Manush.'

"Even today, every worker of our party remains committed to this goal," she said in a post on X, paying homage to the "tireless efforts and sacrifices" of party workers.

Maintaining that the party has been "blessed with the grace, love and prayers of countless people," she said that with public support the TMC would fight for everyone in the country.

"We will not bow to malevolent forces, and disregarding all enmity, our struggle for commoners will continue," she said.

TMC General Secretary Abhishek Banerjee said the party's strength lay in its grassroots workers.

"On Trinamool Congress Foundation Day, I bow my head to all workers of our ever-expanding family," he posted on X.

The Diamond Harbour MP said what began as a movement for change has evolved into a powerful democratic force.

He asserted that as long as the TMC remained anchored to 'Maa, Mati, Manush,' "no force can defeat Bengal."

In a post on X, the Trinamool Congress described itself as a movement "born of a tireless resolve to serve people."

Mamata Banerjee left the Congress and launched the TMC on this day in 1998 to challenge Left Front rule in West Bengal. It came to power in 2011. *—PTI*

TMC accuses CEC of aggression, evading queries on SIR

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee hit out at Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, saying he failed to address their concerns during the SIR in West Bengal and was "aggressive" towards them, after a party delegation met the EC here on Wednesday.

Election Commission (EC) officials said the TMC delegation was told that intimidation of any electoral staff by political representatives will not be tolerated and that the West Bengal government should immediately release the enhanced honorarium to BLOs. Later, TMC sources said the CEC should write a letter to the Union Finance Minister requesting to release West Bengal's Rs 2 lakh crore allegedly blocked by the Centre. The TMC has alleged that the Centre owes the state Rs 2 lakh crore.

Earlier, lashing out at the EC, Banerjee said that his party will not accept the final voter list if it has "discrepancies." *—PTI*

MUNICIPAL POLLS

Denied tickets, some Nagpur BJP workers run solo

NAGPUR, 1 JAN

Upset over being denied tickets by the BJP despite being its "loyal workers for years," several hopefuls rebelled against the party and are now contesting the elections to the Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC) as Independents.

They say denial of tickets to long-time party workers and choosing turncoats or outsiders instead has angered BJP cadres and led to resignations in Nagpur, the home turf of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and Union Minister Nitin Gadkari.

Elections to 29 civic bodies in Maharashtra, including in Nagpur, will be held on 15 January. There are 151 seats in the Nagpur civic body. The BJP is contesting 143 seats along with eight by Shiv Sena. Ajit Pawar's NCP is fighting over 90 seats. While Congress is contesting all 151 seats without any tie-up, the Sharad Pawar-led NCP (SP) is in the fray from 79 seats.

Vinayak Dehankar, a long-time BJP worker and husband of former mayor Archana Dehankar, was denied ticket from Ward 17, which made him resign and contest as an Independent. His wife, however, said she would campaign only for BJP candidates.

Their difference in opinion even led her to shift to her brother's place temporarily to "avoid disputes."

Vinayak Dehankar said he had been working in this ward since many years. Although it was a Congress citadel, he helped the BJP grow, he claimed.

"Senior leaders had assured me that the party would consider my name while finalising the candidate in Ward 17, but that was not done," he said. *—PTI*

3 Sena, one BJP candidate elected unopposed in Kalyan ward of Thane

Three Shiv Sena candidates and one BJP nominee were elected unopposed from ward 24 of the Kalyan Dombivli Municipal Corporation after scrutiny of nominations, an official said on Thursday. Sena's Ramesh Mhatre, Vishwanath Rane and Vrushali Joshi, along with BJP's Jyoti Pawan Patil, secured the seats ahead of the January 15 polls. With this, eight candidates have been elected unopposed so far in the 122-member KDMC—five from the BJP and three from the Eknath Shinde-led Sena following official scrutiny process.

KOLKATA TO GUWAHATI VANDE BHARAT SLEEPER SOON

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will soon flag off India's first Vande Bharat sleeper train between Kolkata and Guwahati, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said here on Thursday.

He said the fares of the Vande Bharat Sleeper Train will be much lower than air services. "I will announce the date soon. The 3rd AC fare will be around Rs 2,300, including food, 2nd AC around Rs 3,000, and 1st AC around Rs 3,600," he said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

'Match fixing' by LDF & UDF will end soon, says PM

T'PURAM, 1 JAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi lashed out at the Kerala blocs —the LDF and the UDF — for playing a "fixed match" in the state and said it was going to come to an end after the BJP's maiden win in the city civic body elections.

The BJP emerging victorious in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation was an "epoch-making" victory, he said in a letter to city Mayor V V Rajesh.

He hailed Rajesh and the BJP leaders for the party coming to power in the state capital in the recently held local body elections.

In the letter dated 30 December, the PM said history was made in Thiruvananthapuram after the mayor and Deputy Mayor G S Asha Nath took oath.

PHOTO: PTI

He said the party's success in Thiruvananthapuram was an indication that the people of Kerala, especially youngsters and women, are ready for a new dawn.

He said the BJP-led NDA is emerging as the people's option, rooted in nationalism without exclusion, development without corruption and governance without appeasement.

The CPI (M) leads the ruling Left Democratic Front and the Congress heads the United Democratic Front. While the two are rivals in Kerala, they are allies in INDIA at the national level.

"These fronts have perpetuated a corruption and violence. Yet despite adversity, hostility and violence, our karyakartas have stood firm," he said. *—PTI*

'SOLO, IF NOT WITH BJP'

Ex-MP Brij Bhushan alleges conspiracy, vows to return to LS

GONDA, 1 JAN

Former Kaiserganj MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh on Wednesday said that he was removed from the Lok Sabha not by the people but through a conspiracy, and vowed to return to the House once more in his life.

Speaking in a news channel podcast, the BJP strongman said his term was cut short, and he was "humiliated and forced out."

"If I am alive, I will definitely go to the Lok Sabha once again... I will try to contest on a BJP ticket. If the party does not give a ticket, I will contest as an Independent," he asserted.

He said it hurt him that he was not invited to the second year of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, even though he is a public representative.

The politician said he declined another invitation as the original 'karsevaks' of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement were ignored while those without any contributions were invited.

He said he has not yet visited Ram Lalla, and when he does, he will stand in the queue like a commoner.

Recalling the sexual harassment allegations against him, Singh said Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav did not make any statement against him, a gesture he said he would never forget.

Brij Bhushan Singh, who represented three parliamentary constituencies of the Devipatan division six times, was replaced by the BJP in the year 2024 after allegations were made against him by some female wrestlers. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

- Former Kaiserganj MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh on Wednesday said that he was removed from the Lok Sabha not by the people but through a conspiracy, and vowed to return to the House once more in his life

India, Pak swap prisoners, nuclear installation lists

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

India has called on Pakistan to expedite the release and repatriation of 167 Indian fishermen and civilian prisoners who have completed their sentences. This appeal coincides with the annual exchange of lists detailing prisoners held in each other's custody, a practice established in 2008 and observed on 1 January and 1 July each year.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has also requested immediate consular access to 35 individuals believed to be Indian in Pakistani custody. This year, India provided details of 391 civil prisoners and 33 fishermen believed to be Pakistani, while Pakistan shared information on 58 civil prisoners and 199 fishermen thought to be Indian.

Additionally, the two nations exchanged lists of their nuclear installations under a 1988 bilateral agreement to prohibit attacks on these sites. Despite ongoing tensions following a military conflict in May, both sides continue to adhere to these protocols. Since 2014, India has successfully repatriated 2,661 Indian fishermen and 71 civilian prisoners from Pakistan, including 500 fishermen and 13 civilians just in 2023. *—PTI*

India, Pakistan exchange prisoners through diplomatic mode **PHOTO: PTI**

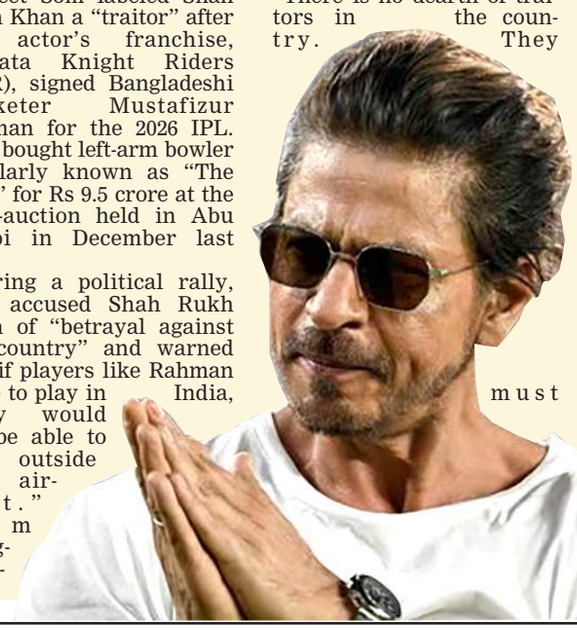
KKR BUYS FOR RS 9.5 CR

BJP calls Shah Rukh 'traitor' over signing Bangladeshi player

LUCKNOW, 1 JAN

Uttar Pradesh's BJP leader Sangeet Som labeled Shah Rukh Khan a "traitor" after the actor's franchise, Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR), signed Bangladeshi cricketer Mustafizur Rahman for the 2026 IPL. KKR bought left-arm bowler popularly known as "The Fizz," for Rs 9.5 crore at the mini-auction held in Abu Dhabi in December last year.

During a political rally, Som accused Shah Rukh Khan of "betrayal against the country" and warned that if players like Rahman came to play in India, "they would not be able to step outside the airport." Som indignantly stated that the actor should leave the country as he had no 'right' to live here. "There is no dearth of traitors in the country. They must be acted against, or they will continue to defame and humiliate the nation," the BJP leader said.



Khan co-owns the cricket franchise through Red Chillies Entertainment, his visual effects, production, and distribution company. KKR is not the only cricket team owned by Khan. The actor also owns three other cricket teams - Abu Dhabi Knight Riders, Los Angeles Knight Riders, and Trinbago Knight Riders.

Som was not alone in making such remarks. Earlier, spiritual leader Devkinandan Thakur also issued a warning to Shah Rukh Khan and the KKR management, saying, "If KKR doesn't take him out of the team, then there will be a game, a big game. It's time to be careful." *—Agencies*

Goa Archbishop flags persecution of minorities

PANAJI, 1 JAN

The Archbishop of Goa and Daman, Filipe Neri Cardinal Ferrao, has expressed serious concerns regarding the persecution of minority communities in India, highlighting that some groups are facing unwarranted attacks, particularly during festive celebrations like Christmas, with what he describes as the tacit approval of authorities.

In his New Year message, the Archbishop lamented the growing sense of insecurity among minority communities and stated, "Such incidents vitiate the moral fabric of our nation, which has traditionally been peace-loving and encouraging of its diverse cultures, religions, and traditions."

He emphasised that these attacks not only inflict pain on Christian communities but also contravene the sacred values that India has historically upheld. "It is indeed a cause for grave concern that, even though the Constitution of India mandates free and fair expression of the practice of one's religion, some communities are persecuted for celebrating their most cherished and important festivals," he remarked.

Cardinal Ferrao called for authorities at all levels to fulfil their constitutional responsibility and ensure justice for the victims, urging them to act decisively and impartially. He also appealed to fellow Indians to unite against divisive forces and strengthen the nation's unity. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Army seizes ammo after suspected drone drop in J&K

MENDHAR/POONCH, 1 JAN

The army on Thursday recovered a consignment suspected to have been dropped by a drone along the Indo-Pakistan border in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district, officials said. The suspected drone drop occurred early in the morning in an area between Rangar Nallah and the Poonch River in the Chakkan da Bagh belt of Khari village. During a search operation, troops recovered a bag containing dozens of ammunition rounds and a yellow tiffin box suspected to be an improvised explosive device (IED). The area was immediately cordoned off as a precaution. The Bomb Disposal Squad (BDS) was called in and examined the bag to rule out any explosive threat. *—PTI*

BSF apprehends Pakistani nat'l at Rajasthan border

JAIPUR, 1 JAN

The Border Security Force (BSF) has apprehended a Pakistani national who allegedly crossed into the Indian territory through the border in Jaisalmer district, officials said on Thursday. The intruder was caught in an area adjoining the Nachna and Nokh sectors, they said. Officials said the intruder is prima facie suspected to be mentally unstable, though his exact condition and background will be confirmed after a detailed medical examination and questioning by the Joint Interrogation Centre (JIC).During preliminary questioning, the man identified himself as Ishrat, 35, son of Rana Mohammad Aslam, and a resident of Sargodha district in Pakistan's Punjab province. The BSF handed over the Pakistani national to the Nokh Police Station for further investigation. *—PTI*

Blast near police station in HP, no casualties reported

NALAGARH, 1 JAN

Residents of Nalagarh in Himachal Pradesh (HP) were jolted awake on New Year's Day by a powerful blast near the local police station. Fortunately, no casualties were reported. The explosion occurred around 9.40am in a lane close to the police station, shattering windows of nearby buildings, including an Army canteen 40 metres away. Eyewitnesses described the detonation as so intense that even 16mm-thick glass broke. Baddi SP Vinod Dhiman confirmed that an investigation is ongoing, stating, "No email or threatening call was received, and prima facie, no mischief involving explosives has been discovered." The forensic team is analysing samples, and CCTV footage is being reviewed to ascertain the cause. *—PTI*

Mumbai youth harrased, detained over language

THANE, 1 JAN

A youth on Thursday claimed that he was harassed and detained at Bhayandar station, on the outskirts of Mumbai, for three hours after he sought to know why announcements were being made only in English and Hindi, and not in Marathi. Railway officials rejected the claim, saying announcements on the Western Railway are made in all three languages. According to the youth, who identified himself as Jigar Patil, he asked the station master for a complaint register to air his grievance that "Marathi was not being used". The station master allegedly threatened to call the Railway Protection Force if Patil continued to argue. The youth claimed that he was taken to the station master's room and made to wait there for nearly three hours. *—PTI*

Tiger deaths in India rose to 166 in '25

40 more than previous year; MP accounts for 55 deaths

BHOPAL, 1 JAN

India, home to nearly three-fourths of the world's tiger population, lost 166 tigers in 2025, 40 more than the previous year, according to the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). The data highlight rising pressures on tiger habitats even as conservation efforts continue to expand.

Madhya Pradesh, known as the country's 'tiger state,' recorded the highest number of deaths at 55. Maharashtra followed with 38 fatalities, while Kerala and Assam reported 13 and 12 deaths, respectively. Of the total deaths reported across India, 31 were cubs.

Experts attribute the spike largely to territorial infighting driven by space constraints. Wildlife expert Jairam Shukla said India's tiger population has reached saturation levels in several forests. "They are facing problems in establishing territories. This is leading to conflicts and deaths," he said. In MP alone, the tiger population has risen by nearly 60 per cent since 2014, he noted.

The NTCA data show that the first tiger death in 2025 was reported on 2 January from Maharashtra's Bramhapuri forest division, where an adult male was found dead. Three days later, a female tiger died inside Madhya Pradesh's Pench Tiger Reserve. The most recent fatality was reported from North Sagar in Madhya Pradesh on 28 December.

According to official estimates released on International Tiger Day in 2023, India's tiger population increased from 2,967 in 2018 to 3,682 in 2022, growing at an annual rate of around six per cent.

Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) Subharanjan Sen said MP's high death count reflected its large tiger population. "Every tiger death is treated as a case of poaching unless proven otherwise," he said, adding that strict patrolling and investigations were in place.

Of the 55 deaths reported in MP this year, over 38 were attributed to natural causes, primarily involving cubs and dispersing young tigers. Ten cases of poaching were registered, leading to 21 arrests, officials said. *—PTI*

- MP was followed by Maharashtra with 38 fatalities, while Kerala and Assam reported 13 and 12 deaths. Experts attribute the spike to territorial infighting driven by space constraints

'Drunk' AI pilot held before flying in Canada

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

- Air India said the pilot was offloaded after Canadian authorities raised concerns regarding his "fitness for duty". The flight was delayed by about two hours

An Air India pilot was detained at Vancouver airport in Canada on 23 December after allegedly consuming alcohol shortly before operating a Delhi-bound flight, triggering safety concerns and delaying the service, according to reports and airline statements.

The pilot was scheduled to operate flight AI186, a Boeing 777 service from Vancouver to Delhi via Vienna. Reports said a staff member at the airport's duty-free store alerted Canadian authorities after either noticing the smell of alcohol or seeing the pilot consume liquor while purchasing it. Authorities subjected the pilot to a breathanalyser test, which he failed, following which he was detained.

Air India said the pilot was offloaded after Canadian authorities raised concerns regarding his "fitness for duty". The flight was delayed by about two hours before an alternate pilot was rostered. The aircraft later continued to Delhi from Vienna with another set of pilots.

"The pilot was flown to Delhi a couple of days later and is being probed. The issue has been reported to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), which is also examining the matter," sources were quoted as saying.

Air India said the pilot had been taken off flying duties pending the inquiry and that any confirmed violation would invite strict disciplinary action, reiterating that passenger safety remained its highest priority.

Separately, the DGCA issued a show-cause notice to an Air India cockpit crew for operating multiple Delhi–Tokyo flights despite serious compliance lapses, seeking an explanation within two weeks. Officials said investigations in cases continue. *—Agencies*

Lokpal withdraws tender for 7 luxury BMWs valued at Rs 5 cr

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Anti-graft ombudsman Lokpal has withdrawn its controversial tender to procure seven luxury BMW cars, collectively valued at around Rs 5 crore, two months after it was issued, officials said on Thursday.

The decision follows widespread criticism from opposition parties and civil society activists, who accused the institution of prioritising luxury over integrity. The cancellation came after a resolution of the full bench of the Lokpal, formalised through a corrigendum dated 16 December, 2025.

The original tender, floated on 16 October, 2025, sought bids from reputed agencies for seven BMW 3 Series 330Li "M Sport" long-wheelbase vehicles in white. The cars were intended for the chairperson and six members of the Lokpal, currently chaired by Justice AM Khanwilkar(retd). The body can have up to eight members, equally divided between judicial and non-judicial members.

The tender specified that the selected vendor would provide comprehensive training for drivers, covering both theoretical and practical aspects. This included familiarisation with vehicle features, controls, safety systems, emergency handling, start-up and parking procedures, and driving modes to ensure efficient and safe operation.

The proposal drew sharp criticism from political and civic quarters. Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh labeled the institution "Shauq Pal", while former NITI Aayog CEO Kant urged the Lokpal to consider India-made EVs instead. *—PTI*

Abortion decision rests with woman: HC

CHANDIGARH, 1 JAN

It is a married woman's willingness and consent that alone matter, the Punjab and Haryana High Court has held, allowing a 21-year-old petitioner from Punjab to undergo abortion without her husband's approval.

The direction came on a plea seeking permission to terminate a second-trimester pregnancy. The petitioner said she married on 2 May, 2025, and has since had a turbulent relationship with her husband, with divorce proceedings under way.

In an earlier hearing, the court directed the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, to constitute a medical board. Its 23 December report found the woman medically fit for medical termination of pregnancy. It recorded a single live intra-uterine foetus of 16 weeks and one day, with no congenital malformation.

The board noted that the patient has suffered depression and anxiety for six months and is under treatment with minimal improvement. "She is severely distressed about her pregnancy amidst divorce proceedings... She is psychologically fit to consent," the report said.

Justice Suvir Sehgal observed that the only issue was whether the estranged husband's consent was required.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, does not provide for any express or implied consent of the woman's husband, the court said. *—PTI*

Delhi BMW crash: Victim didn't get timely care

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Mohammad Gulfam (left), who rushed four injured people from BMW crash near Delhi's Dhaula Kuan to a hospital **PHOTO: ANI and PTI**

Navjot Singh, a 52-year-old finance ministry official, was alive for at least 15 minutes after being hit by a speeding BMW near Dhaula Kuan last September and could have survived with timely medical attention, Delhi Police stated in its chargesheet.

The final 400-page report, submitted last week to Judicial Magistrate Ankit Garg, alleges that the accused, Gaganpreet Makkad, deliberately delayed providing critical medical care. On 14 September, Singh, a deputy secretary in the Department of Economic Affairs, and three others, including his wife, were injured when Makkad's BMW X5, reportedly traveling at 100–110km/h on a 50km/h stretch, crashed into a metro pillar near Delhi Cantonment Metro Station, overturned, and struck Singh's motorcycle.

Citing the post-mortem and a speed analysis report, police said the impact was severe, yet Singh survived for several minutes. Instead of taking the injured to nearby hospitals such as Delhi Cantonment Hospital or AIIMS Trauma Center, Makkad drove 20km to Nu life Hospital in GTB Nagar, described in the report as a "small two-store nursing home with limited facilities," delaying crucial trauma care.

Police noted that Makkad refused assistance from an ambulance that arrived at the scene and allegedly admitted herself to the ICU despite minor injuries to mislead investigators. The investigation is ongoing, including alleged manipulation of medical records at Nulife Hospital, with which the accused reportedly has distant family links. *—PTI*

After Delhi, Kolkata hit by 'very poor' AQI

BHUBANESHWAR, 1 JAN

Fog and cold conditions caused widespread disruptions across north and east India. Delhi recorded shallow fog and cold weather on New Year's Day, with visibility dipping to 500 metres at key locations, the India Meteorological Department said, while air quality remained "very poor".

Meanwhile, flight operations at Biju Patnaik International Airport (BPIA) in Bhubaneswar were disrupted on Thursday morning after dense fog reduced runway visibility, forcing diversions and delays, airport authorities said.

Runway visual range dropped to 50 metres around 6.30am, far below the required 550 metres, leading to the diversion of five incoming flights, three from New Delhi, one from Bengaluru and one from Chennai, to Kolkata and Raipur, BPIA director Prasanna Pradhan said.

Two outbound flights, including services to Dehradun and regional destinations such as Jeypore, Utkela and Jamshedpur, were also delayed. Operations normalised after visibility improved post 10.30am.

Kolkata also reported "poor" to "very poor" air quality due to winter fog. Despite the cold, devotees gathered at major religious sites across Uttar Pradesh, with authorities deploying special arrangements and heightened security. *—Agencies*

The air quality of Kolkata on New Year's Day on Thursday was "poor", according to the official meterological sources **PHOTO: X**

Naxal with Rs 50,000 bounty killed in Bihar

PATNA, 1 JAN

A Naxalite commander carrying a Rs 50,000 bounty was killed on Wednesday evening during a gunfight with the Special Task Force (STF) of Bihar Police in Begusarai district.

The deceased, identified as Dayanand Malakar, served as the secretary of the North-Bihar Central Zonal Committee of the outlawed CPI-Maoist. Malakar, alias Chotu, was wanted in more than 14 criminal cases. Two of his associates were also apprehended during the operation, police said.

Acting on a tip-off, task force personnel reached the location in the Teghra area of Begusarai where Malakar and his two associates were hiding. Upon spotting the police, Malakar attempted to escape and opened fire on the team.

STF personnel retaliated, and Malakar was injured while his two accomplices were successfully arrested. No security personnel was injured.

Malakar was rushed to the nearest government hospital, where he was declared dead on arrival. Police recovered a 5.56 MM INSAS rifle, a country-made pistol, 25 live cartridges, and 15 spent cartridges from the hiding spot. *—PTI*

Sabarimala row: Gold lost exceeds recovery, says SIT

T'PURAM, 1 JAN

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) recovered over 400 grams of gold from Govardhan's jewellery store. **PHOTO: X**

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing the Sabarimala gold loss case has told the Kollam Vigilance Court that more gold may have been lost from the temple than recovered so far.

Seeking custody of Unnikrishnan Potti, Smart Creations CEO Pankaj Bhandari and jeweller Govardhan Roddam, the SIT said 42.100kg of gold-clad copper plates were handed to Potti for electroplating in 2019 and the remaining gold was allegedly siphoned off.

The plates included those from Dwarapalaka idols, two pillars and seven Sreekovil doorframes, featuring Dasavatar and rashi symbols, and a Prabha Mandalam with Siva and Vyali figures. The SIT said Bhandari confessed to taking 109.243grams as fees, later produced, while Govardhan submitted 474.960 grams. Investigators believe the recovered quantity is lower than the actual gold content.

Samples sent to the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre for analysis are awaited. So far, 10 people, including two former Travancore Devaswom Board presidents, have been arrested. The probe triggered a row over reports of plans to question UDF convenor Adoor Prakash recently. *—PTI*

INDORE WATER CONTAMINATION

Vijayvargiya's 'ghanta' remark sparks row

INDORE, 1 JAN

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav (centre), with Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya (left), during a high-level review meeting regarding the water contamination incident, at MY Hospital in Indore **PHOTO: PTI**

Senior Madhya Pradesh Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya has triggered a storm after using an objectionable slang term on camera while responding to questions about a diarrhoea outbreak in the Bhagirthpura area in Indore, caused due to the contaminated drinking water.

The incident occurred late Wednesday night as the Urban Development and Housing Minister spoke to reporters after visiting Bhagirathpura. Official records put the death toll at four, with 212 people hospitalised, though residents claim over ten fatalities.

Vijayvargiya was questioned by a reporter Anurag Dwary on why affected families had not been reimbursed for private hospital bills and why clean water arrangements remained inadequate. Flanked by supporters and officials, the minister dismissed the queries as "fokat", or useless, before a heated exchange followed.

In a video that later went viral, Vijayvargiya is heard using the word "ghanta", a derogatory slang often used to mean nonsense, to brush aside the reporter's question, drawing criticism.

Following the backlash, the BJP leader issued a statement expressing regret. "My team and I have been working in the affected area for the past two days without sleep. My people are suffering and some have lost their lives. In this state of deep grief, my words came out wrong," he said. MP Congress Committee president Patwari shared the clip, alleging deaths rose to ten and accusing the BJP of arrogance, demanding Vijayvargiya's resignation. *—PTI*

END RACIAL DISCRIMNATION

Residents and students from the Northeast held a candlelight march in Dehradun to protest the killing of 24-year-old Anjel Chakma from Tripura, demanding an end to racial discrimination. Students gathered at Gandhi Park and marched to Ghantaghar, joined by students from other states. Chanting slogans such as "Stop Racism" and "We Are Indians", they carried placards with Chakma's photograph. A final-year MBA student, Chakma was attacked on 9 December, during which assailants allegedly hurled racial slurs, calling him "Chinese momo". He died on 26 December after 17 days in hospital ***PHOTO: PTI***

With MGNREGA row, stage set for 2026 political battles

The law met with protests from opposition parties in Parliament, as well as activists outside it, who argued that it alters the rights-based approach in the earlier Act. ***PHOTO:ANI***

The rural jobscape is set to change in the future, and more politically contentious, as 2025 became the year when the two-decade-old MGNREGA, brought during the first UPA government, was replaced by the Viksit Bharat- Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission Act, or VB-G RAM G, as the government dubbed it.

The law met with protests from opposition parties in Parliament, as well as activists outside it, who argued that it alters the rights-based approach in the earlier Act.

Removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name from the original Act also met with vociferous denunciation by the Opposition.

In defence, Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan slammed critics and dismissed their objections as "misinformation" against the VB-G RAM G Act, which, he said, is a step ahead of MGNREGA.

According to the Rural Development Ministry, the VB-G RAM G Act is aimed at establishing a "future-ready, convergence-driven, saturation-oriented rural development architecture."

The government argued that it aims to transform rural employment from a standalone welfare intervention into an integrated instrument of development.

While the MGNREGA provided for 100 days of wage labour, the VB-G RAM G Act provisions 125 days of work, which, the government said, enhances the "guarantee" for work.

Activists, however, argued that even under the MGNREGA, workers, on average, got around 50 days of work.

According to a reply by the Rural Development Ministry to a written question in Rajya Sabha in the Winter Session, in 2024-25, the average of employment provided per household under MGNREGA was 50.24 days.

The new Act, the government said, is explicitly aligned with the creation of durable public assets across four priority thematic domains — water security and water-related works, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related infrastructure, and extreme weather events mitigation.

All work originates from the Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans (VGPPs), prepared at the gram panchayat level through participatory processes and approved by the gram sabha, and would be digitally and spatially integrated with national platforms, including PM Gati Shakti.

The MGNREGA was a demand-driven scheme, which meant the additional funds had to be provided if there was demand for work. The VB-G RAM G Act provides for normative allocation to states, and any expenditure beyond it has to be borne by the state.

While under the old Act, the Centre bore 100 per cent of the wage cost, and 75 per cent of the material cost, the VB-G RAM G provides for a cost-sharing pattern of 60:40 between the Centre and states, 90:10 for North Eastern and Himalayan States, and 100 per cent central funding for Union Territories without legislatures.

Activists have said the pattern weakens the law and puts additional burden on states, and will eventually lead to people not getting work.

Chouhan, however, said the allocations would be sufficient under the scheme for employment to be provided.

The VB-G RAM G talks about a comprehensive digital ecosystem, including biometric authentication, global positioning system or mobile-based worksite monitoring, proactive public disclosures, and AI for planning, audits and fraud risk mitigation, which will be used to modernise governance, accountability and citizen engagement.

LibTech India, a consortium of academics, researchers and activists working on the MGNREGA, warned against "MIS-isation" of welfare delivery.

It said over time, implementation processes became heavily dependent on digital workflows and system compliance, to the extent that activities not reflected in the MIS were often treated as if they had not occurred at all, leading to denial of rights, delayed grievance redress, and "invisibilisation" of genuine work.

With corruption under MGNREGA being one of the top concerns that the government seeks to address through technological interventions, the activists pointed out that social audits and public hearings, which were designed to address corruption under the old Act, were "under-funded and weakened."

NREGA Sangharsh Morcha, a platform of workers' collectives engaged in public action on the scheme, said the VB-G RAM G Act represents a fundamental shift from a rights-based law that provides an enforceable entitlement to a budget-constrained scheme without any accountability of the Union Government.

Activists also flagged that the law gives discretionary powers to the Centre. The Congress said it would start a nationwide campaign against this from 5 January.

Left parties gave a call for protest against the new Act on 22 December, while the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Punjab called a one-day special session of the assembly to oppose the VB-G RAM G Act. Protests were held under the banners of the NSM and other outfits, with trade unions and farmer organisations, including the SKM, extending support to the protests against the repeal of the MGNREGA with the VB-GRAMG Act. *—PTI*

SALAR

Broken families behind UP's most violent crimes

In a year when Uttar Pradesh grappled with violent crime, some of the most disturbing cases were not about strangers or organised gangs, but about families imploding from within — where trust collapsed, blood ties snapped, and relationships ended not in separation but in death.

Police records, post-mortem reports and court proceedings across districts told variations of the same story of relationships curdling into hostility and private disputes turning fatal.

One of the most chilling cases surfaced in September when police in Sambhal uncovered what they described as an "insurance mafia" operating from within a family.

It was alleged that Vishal Singhal killed his parents years apart and later his ex-wife, to claim insurance payouts exceeding Rs 50 crore. His mother's death in 2017 and his father's death in April this year were projected as road accidents and quietly closed at the time.

It was only after a woman from Meerut approached police that the pattern emerged – 64 insurance policies, staged accidents and deaths spread over eight years, all allegedly orchestrated by the son.

"The motive was money, but the betrayal was of a different order," a police officer involved in the probe said privately.

Barely months later, another horror unfolded in Jaunpur, where a retired railway employee and his wife were killed by their own son.

In Ahmadpur village, on 8 December, Ambesh allegedly bludgeoned his mother to death with a pestle after a fight over money. When his father tried to intervene and alert the police, he too was killed. The bodies were dismembered and dumped in the Gomti River. For days, the accused misled family members before confessing.

If money fractured families, marriage too proved volatile.

In Varanasi, 26-year-old Aarti Pal was allegedly beaten to death by her husband just a week after their wedding in May. In another case from the city, Rahul Mishra, 30, died by suicide in December, leaving behind a video accusing his wife, her alleged lover and his mother-in-law of harassment.

Police booked the three for abetment of suicide.

Property disputes turned deadly in Ghazipur in July, when Abhay Yadav allegedly hacked his parents and sister to death after discovering that a piece of land that he thought must go to him had been transferred to his sister.

The incidents unfolded alongside a broader churn in personal relationships that repeatedly made headlines across the state — extramarital affairs ending in murder, marriages collapsing within days, and families redefining boundaries in startling ways.

In Sant Kabir Nagar, Bablu, after discovering his wife's extramarital affair, decided to marry her off to her lover. "I preferred peace over confrontation," Bablu told PTI. Referring to the headline-grabbing Meerut 'blue drum' murder, he said fear of escalating violence shaped his decision.

In Farrukhabad, Rahul separated from his wife, Vaishnavi, to help her remarry, even as the couple await a formal divorce.

In Aligarh, a woman eloped with the man her daughter was set to marry just days later, leaving the family shocked.

The daughter told the media that while there were signs of frequent phone conversations, no one imagined such a turn.

Not all such cases had a pacifist ending — some left behind a trail of blood.

In Bijnor, Shivani's claim that her husband died of a heart attack collapsed after an autopsy revealed strangulation.

In Auraiya, a marriage lasted just 15 days before the woman, her lover, and a contract killer allegedly murdered her husband. Others reflected bold, if unsettling, choices.

In Budaun, Mamta, a 43-year-old mother of four, eloped with her daughter's father-in-law after a year-long affair.

In Siddharthnagar, two married villagers ran away and married each other, leaving behind their spouses and nine children.

In Amroha, a twice-married woman converted to Hinduism and married an 18-year-old schoolboy, despite having three children from previous marriages.

The Meerut 'blue drum' case cast a long shadow in public discourse.

Police alleged Muskan Rastogi and her partner murdered her husband, dismembered his body and concealed it in a cement-filled drum — a case that became a subject of a rash of memes and a shorthand for spousal brutality.

Equally disturbing was the snakebite murder case from Baghpat, where police alleged that a woman and her lover killed her husband and passed it off as death caused by a venomous snake.

Counselling psychologist Supriya Das said these were not isolated crimes but symptoms of deeper social shifts. "There is growing intolerance for emotional dissatisfaction, coupled with impulsive decisions during conflict," she said.

Police pointed out that while motives vary — greed, jealousy, suspicion or control — the common thread is the collapse of dialogue. "In many cases, there was prolonged tension. Instead of mediation or separation, people chose violence," an officer said. *—PTI*

Muskan Rastogi and her partner murdered her husband, dismembered his body, and concealed it in a cement-filled drum, a case that grabbed headlines as the 'Blue Drum Murder' ***PHOTO: PTI***

LETTERS

write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

At 28, TMC recasts identity politics as it enters high-stakes poll year

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee with her nephew Abhishek Banerjee led an all-faith march against SIR in Kolkata on 4 November ***PHOTO: PTI***

As the TMC enters its 28th year and an election cycle, the party is recalibrating its ideological position, blending Bengali 'asmita' with a clearer assertion of "Bengali Hindu identity" to consolidate Hindu support without unsettling its traditional minority vote bank, while countering the BJP's appeasement narrative.

Founded on 1 January, 1998, as a breakaway from the Congress to challenge the Left Front's entrenched rule, the TMC rose to power in 2011 on the back of grassroots mobilisation around the slogan of 'Maa, Mati, Manush'.

Nearly 15 years into office, the party enters not just another year but an election cycle, with the 2026 Assembly polls barely three months away, confronting a transformed political landscape marked by sharper identity assertions and a narrowing contest with the BJP.

That recalibration is most visible in the political symbolism crafted by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for the last few months. She has either inaugurated or announced a series of temple projects, including a 213-foot Jagannath temple at Digha in south Bengal, a Durga temple and cultural complex in Kolkata, and a Mahakal temple in Siliguri, expected to be unveiled later this month.

The Jagannath temple at Digha, inaugurated last year amid elaborate rituals and a high-profile guest list, has been built at an estimated cost of Rs 250 crore from the public exchequer. Officially pitched as a tourism and pilgrimage initiative, the structure draws architectural inspiration from the 12th-century shrine in Odisha's Puri.

Politically, however, the messaging has been difficult to miss. Senior representatives of influential Hindu religious institutions were present at the inauguration, many of whom have received sustained state support for renovation and infrastructure development in recent years.

Party insiders privately acknowledge that the optics are intended to counter the BJP's persistent portrayal of Banerjee as a leader driven by minority appeasement, a narrative that has "gained traction as the electoral gap between the two parties has narrowed".

The TMC's vote margin over the BJP declined from around 61 lakh votes in the 2021 Assembly elections to roughly 42 lakh in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, heightening concern within the ruling party ahead of the assembly contest.

Political scientist Biswanath Chakraborty describes the strategy as carefully weighed but risky. "She is attempting to reach out to Bengali Hindus without positioning herself against Muslims. It is a delicate exercise, and there is a danger of appearing like a diluted version of the BJP," he said.

Within Bengal's political discourse, Banerjee's approach has "increasingly been described as Hinduani, a public assertion of Hindu religiosity that distances itself from the ideological edges of North Indian Hindutva", another analyst said.

While rejecting the idea of a Hindu Rashtra, Banerjee has more visibly foregrounded her personal faith, from reciting 'Chandi Path' at public events to invoking her Brahmin lineage during heated Assembly exchanges with BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari, even as she continues to attend Eid and Christmas celebrations.

The TMC leadership, however, rejects the ideological drift. Senior MP Sougata Roy dismissed the "soft Hindutva" label, insisting the party remains firmly secular. "The TMC has not moved towards soft Hindutva. Recognising religious sentiments of all communities does not mean abandoning secularism," Roy told PTI.

He also alleged, "The BJP tries to create insecurity among sections of Bengali Hindus. The TMC is simply making it clear that Bengali Hindus are safe under its governance." Its state vice president Jaiprakash Majumdar framed the 2026 election as a clash of political worldviews. "Respecting Durga Puja or Jagannath Puja is part of Bengal's culture, just as respecting Muharram or Christmas is. We do not need lessons on Hinduism or secularism from the BJP," he said.

Banerjee has continued to engage across religious communities. She attends Eid prayers on Red Road, leads Kolkata's Christmas carnival on Park Street and recently visited the Furfura Sharif shrine.

At the same time, her government has sharply increased grants to Durga Puja committees, raising assistance from Rs 10,000 per club in 2018 to Rs 85,000 in 2024, translating into over Rs 365 crore outlay.

Political analyst Maidul Islam sees the shift as a defensive recalibration. "Since 2016, the TMC has consciously developed a narrative of Bengali Hindu religiosity to neutralise the BJP's minority appeasement charge," he said.

The strategy has raised questions among minorities, who account for close to 30 per cent of the electorate and have been the party's loyal vote bank since 2011.

ISF MLA Nawsad Siddique accused the TMC of edging towards majoritarian symbolism. "If public funds are used for temple construction, other communities will inevitably raise similar demands," he said.A senior TMC leader from the minority community countered that the government had done substantial welfare work and extended allowances to imams and muezzins.

Political analyst Suman Bhattacharya said, "After nearly 15 years in power, the TMC must offer a renewed narrative, especially to younger voters. The softer Hindu articulation appears aimed at reassuring the urban middle class without alienating Muslims."

TMC's ideological tightrope may either entrench its dominance or blur its secular moorings, but it is clear the party has moved beyond defending incumbency to recasting the rules of contest in a polarised Bengal. *—PTI*

QUOTE of THE DAY

The United States has set a World Record on investments being made into a Country, and it is Trillions of Dollars more than number two, China. This is singularly because of TARIFFS

—DONALD TRUMP,
US President

Candle caused Swiss roof collapse, say survivors

'Horror' breaks out at popular skiing World Cup destination

NEW YORK, 1 JAN

Eyewitnesses said that the fire which engulfed the Crans-Montana resort in Switzerland was likely caused by a candle which touched the wooden ceiling.

Two women told French broadcaster BFMTV that they were inside when they saw a barman carrying a barmaid on his shoulders. The barmaid was holding a lit candle in a bottle that set fire to the wooden ceiling. The flames quickly spread and collapsed the ceiling, they told the broadcaster.

One of the women described a crowd surge as people frantically tried to escape from a basement nightclub up a narrow flight of stairs and through a narrow door.

Another witness speaking to BFMTV described people smashing windows to escape the blaze, some gravely injured, and panicked parents rushing to the scene in cars to see whether their children were trapped inside. The young man said he saw about 20 people scrambling to get out of the smoke and flames and likened what he saw to a horror movie as he watched from across the street.

Officials described how the blaze likely triggered the release of combustible gases that ignited violently and caused a "flashover" or "backdraft".

Dozens of people were killed when a fire broke out during a New Year's party at Crans-Montana resort, in Switzerland **PHOTO: ANI**

"This evening should have been a moment of celebration and coming together, but it turned into a nightmare," said Mathias Reynard, head of the regional government of the Valais Canton.

The injured were so numerous that the intensive care unit and operating theatre at the regional hospital quickly hit full capacity, Reynard said.

Authorities have called on the local population to show caution in the coming days to avoid any accidents that could require medical resources that are already overwhelmed.

With high-altitude ski runs rising around 3,000 metres in the heart of the Valais region's snowy peaks and pine forests, Crans-Montana is one of the top venues on the World Cup circuit.

The resort will host the best men's and women's downhill racers, including Lindsey Vonn, for their final events before the Milan Cortina Olympics in February. The town's Crans-sur-Sierre golf club stages the European Masters each August on a picturesque course.

The incident occurred on Swiss President Guy Parmelin's first day in office as the seven members of Switzerland's government take turns holding the presidency for one year.

He expressed his condolences and out of respect, delayed a traditional New Year's address to the nation. —*PTI*

Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani takes the oath to office next to his wife Rama Duwaji (right) at a subway station in New York on New Year's day. Mamdani took his oath on the Quran **PHOTO: PTI**

Zohran takes oath as NYC's 1st Muslim Mayor

NEW YORK, 1 JAN

Zohran Mamdani was formally sworn in as New York City's 112th Mayor in a private ceremony held just moments into the New Year in an old subway station in New York.

The 34-year-old Indian-descent Queens state assemblyman became the first South Asian and Muslim elected to helm the largest city in the US.

Mamdani was sworn in at the old City Hall subway station at a private ceremony attended only by his family and close advisers.

Mamdani was sworn in as New York City's mayor on a Quran – the first time the holy scripture was used for the ceremony — by state Attorney General Letitia James with his wife, artist Rama Duwaji, by his side.

On the choice of the old subway station as the venue for his historic swearing-in, Mamdani said that when the Old City Hall Station first opened in 1904 — one of New York's 28 original subway stations — "it was a physical monument to a city that dared to be both beautiful and build great things that would transform working people's lives."

Mamdani is the son of renowned filmmaker Mira Nair and Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani. He had registered a decisive and historic win at the polls in November defeating Republican Curtis Sliwa and political heavyweight former New York State governor Andrew Cuomo, who ran as an Independent. —*PTI*

Flash floods kill at least 17 people in Afghanistan

KABUL, 1 JAN

The season's first heavy rains and snowfall ended a prolonged dry spell but triggered flash floods in several areas of Afghanistan, killing at least 17 people and injuring 11 others, a Taliban spokesperson said on Thursday. The severe weather also disrupted daily life across central, northern, southern, and western regions, according to Mohammad Yousaf Hammad, spokesman for Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority. He said the floods also damaged infrastructure in the affected districts, killed livestock, and affected 1,800 families, worsening conditions in already vulnerable urban and rural communities. Hammad said the agency has sent assessment teams to the worst-affected areas, with surveys ongoing. Decades of conflict, poor infrastructure, deforestation, and the intensifying effects of climate change have amplified the impact of such disasters. —*PTI*

Syrian cop killed in suicide bombing on NY Eve

DAMASCUS, 1 JAN

One Syrian police officer was killed and others wounded in a suicide bombing late Wednesday in the northern city of Aleppo, Syrian state media reported. A patrol of the Internal Security Forces was attempting to detain the bomber in the neighborhood near the Bab al-Faraj archaeological site when he detonated himself, according to state news agency SANA. Aleppo governor Azzam al-Gharib said that the police patrol was on duty securing the New Year celebrations in the city when they spotted the bomber and chased after him. One of the police officers "managed to physically restrain him" when the man detonated an explosive belt, he said. He said the situation was "under control." —*PTI*

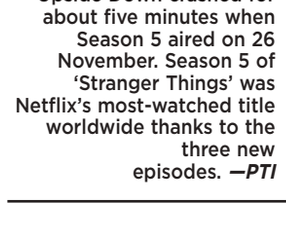


PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Netflix crashes as 'Stranger Things' finale premieres

LOS ANGELES, 1 JAN

Netflix crashed for about a minute when the finale of the beloved 'Stranger Things' premiered on Wednesday. Many people reported being unable to long onto the streaming platform. Users encountering the error were met with an image from "Nailed It!" with the caption: "Something went wrong. Sorry, we're having trouble with your request. You'll find lots to explore on the home page". The series that debuted in 2016 and became an instant hit with viewers with its band of adventure-loving kids, nostalgic 80s setting and the Upside Down crashed for about five minutes when Season 5 aired on 26 November. Season 5 of 'Stranger Things' was Netflix's most-watched title worldwide thanks to the three new episodes. —*PTI*

Trump withdraws National Guard from 4 major cities

WASHINGTON, 1 JAN

President Donald Trump said he's dropping — for now — his push to deploy National Guard troops in Chicago, Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon, a move that comes after legal roadblocks hung up the effort.

"We are removing the National Guard from Chicago, Los Angeles, and Portland, despite the fact that CRIME has been greatly reduced," he wrote on Truth Social. "We will come back, perhaps in a much different and stronger form, when crime begins to soar again - Only a question of time."

"It is hard to believe that these Democrat Mayors and Governors, all of whom are greatly incompetent, would want us to leave, especially considering the great progress that has been made?" he added.

Troops had already left Los Angeles after the President deployed them earlier this year as part of a broader crackdown on crime and immigration. They had been sent to Chicago and Portland but were never on the streets as legal challenges played out.

A week earlier, the Supreme Court refused to authorise the deployment of the National Guard in Chicago after Illinois officials objected. —*PTI*

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu celebrates New Year with US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump at Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

US sanctions 4 Venezuelan oil firms, 4 more tankers

WASHINGTON, 1 JAN

The US on Wednesday imposed sanctions on four firms operating in Venezuela's oil sector and designated four additional oil tanker, as blocked property. The government accused the tankers of being part of a shadow fleet serving Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Meanwhile, the US military said Wednesday it struck three more boats that were allegedly smuggling drugs, killing three people while others jumped overboard and may have survived.

It is unclear if those who jumped overboard were rescued and where the attacks occurred. Previous attacks have been in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. At least 110 people have been killed in the 33 strikes since September. This comes after Trump announced that the CIA had attacked a Venezuelan port, after US forces seized two oil tankers off of Venezuela's coast. —*PTI*

DoJ is reviewing 5.2 million Epstein files

The Department of Justice (DoJ) has expanded its review of documents related to the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein to 5.2 million and increased the number of attorneys to 400 to release all the files. However, the DoJ does not expect to release more documents until 20 or 21 January, a source said.

Pak launches reforms as per IMF directions

ISLAMABAD, 1 JAN

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has launched a wide-ranging reform programme in line with conditions set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to address governance and corruption vulnerabilities identified in a recent IMF report.

The 186-page IMF Governance and Corruption Diagnostic, released late last year, flagged large-scale leakages caused by weak governance and corruption. Under the IMF's USD 7 billion bailout package, Pakistan was required to publish a governance action plan by 31 December.

The newly launched 142-point reform plan includes a national corruption risk assessment, rule-based appointments in key institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), and measures to improve NAB's credibility.

Shehbaz said the plan incorporates international recommendations but is fundamentally a homegrown. The plan comprises 59 priority actions and 83 complementary actions to be implemented over three years. —*PTI*

No evidence Ukraine attacked Putin's home: CIA

WASHINGTON, 1 JAN

The CIA concluded that Ukraine did not attempt to target Russian President Vladimir Putin or any of his residences with drones, countering Moscow's allegation that Kyiv sought to assassinate the Russian leader, The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported.

The CIA determined that Ukraine had been planning to strike a military objective located in the same region as Putin's country residence, but not in close proximity to it, an official said. The CIA has not commented on the matter publicly.

The findings come after Russia shared videos purporting to show the strikes to counter Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy calling the reports a "lie". Moscow also threatened harsh retaliation over the strikes.

When asked whether US intelligence had confirmed the alleged incident, US President Donald Trump responded: "Maybe the attack didn't take place--that is possible too, I guess, but Putin told me this morning it did." —*ANI*

Ukraine strikes on NY party kills 24 in Russian-occupied Kherson

MOSCOW, 1 JAN

At least 24 people were killed, and more than 50 were injured when three Ukrainian drones struck a cafe and a hotel in the Russian-occupied Kherson region, where people were celebrating the New Year. The strike took place on Wednesday night.

"The enemy launched a drone attack on a site where civilians were celebrating the New Year. Three UAVs struck a cafe and a hotel on the Black Sea coast in Khorly. Around 50 people were injured, and 24 were killed," Kherson Governor Volodymyr Saldo was quoted as saying by Rossiya-24 channel.

Air defence systems destroyed 168 Ukrainian UAVs during the New Year night, and many airports in south and central Russia were closed for hours due to the drone threat, the Defence Ministry said. — *Agencies*

Russia launched 205 drones at Ukraine on New Year's night, but no casualities were reported **PHOTO: UKRAINE EMERGENCY SERVICE**

BIGGEST PROTESTS SINCE 2022

Iranian Guard killed in anti-govt protests

Protests have broken out across Iran as the weakening Rial has sent prices skyrocketting

PHOTO: X @OSINT_MASR

DUBAI, 1 JAN

A volunteer member of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was killed during protests in Kouhdasht, Lorestan province, marking the first fatality among security forces amidst escalating demonstrations related to the country's struggling economy.

The 21-year-old was "martyred... at the hands of rioters" according to Saeed Pourali, a deputy governor, who also stated that 13 other Basij members and police officers were injured.

Pourali emphasised that the unrest stemmed from "economic pressures, inflation and currency fluctuations," and urged for an attentive response to citizens' demands while warning against exploiting their grievances.

The protests have drawn wider participation across provinces, although they have slowed in the capital, Tehran.

President Masoud Pezeshkian's government is attempting to engage with protesters, but the economic situation remains dire, with the rial depreciating to 1.4 million to the US dollar.

However, the death may mark the start of a heavier-handed response by Iran's theocracy.

State media reported that seven individuals were arrested, including alleged monarchists.

The protests have become the biggest in Iran since 2022, when the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody triggered nationwide demonstrations. Amini was detained for not wearing her hijab. The recent protests have heard chants against Iran's theocracy. —*PTI*

BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman during the funeral prayers of his mother and Bangladesh former PM Khaleda Zia, in Dhaka **PHOTO: PTI**

B'DESH GRIEVES KHALEDA'S DEATH, TARIQUE THANKS ATTENDEES

DHAKA, 1 JAN

Bangladesh is in mourning following the funeral of former prime minister Khaleda Zia, attended by dignitaries including India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar. Tarique Rahman, the acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), expressed gratitude to those who attended, stating, "I want to thank individuals whose care and professionalism helped ensure my mother's final farewell." He also acknowledged the government's efforts.

Meanwhile, Pakistan highlighted a brief handshake between Jaishankar and Pakistani officials at the funeral as a potential opportunity for dialogue, stressing the need to avoid escalation following recent tensions. —*ANI*

QUOTE of THE DAY

Support from local law enforcement helped keep the small number of miscreants in check, enabling 4.5 lakh+ delivery partners across both platforms to deliver more than 75 lakh orders (all-time high) to over 63 lakh customers during the day

—DEEPINDER GOYAL,
Zomato CEO on gig workers' strike

TOBACCO STOCKS TANK AS GOVT IMPOSES 40% TAX

ITC down by 9.6%, Godfrey Phillips falls 17%

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Shares of cigarette and tobacco product manufacturers fell sharply in morning trade on Thursday after the government notified that from 1 February additional excise duty on tobacco products and a health cess on pan masala will be levied.

ITC Ltd's shares dropped as much as 9.69 per cent to Rs 363.95, marking their steepest fall since 2020. Godfrey Phillips India Ltd (GPI) fell 17.17 per cent on the BSE, down Rs 474.30 to Rs 2,288. ITC sells cigarette brands such as Classic and Gold Flake, while Godfrey Phillips markets Marlboro and Four Square.

According to a Jefferies, ITC may need to raise cigarette prices by at least 15 per cent, or more, to pass on the full impact of the tax hike to consumers. Cigarettes contribute over 40 per cent of ITC's total revenue.

The levy of an excise duty on tobacco products and a health cess on pan masala was approved by Parliament last month. In September, the GST Council, comprising finance ministers from the Centre and states, finalised the mechanism to impose these levies over and above GST after the compensation cess mechanism ends.

At present, tobacco products attract 28 per cent GST along with a compensation cess at varying rates. From 1 February, the GST rate will rise to 40 per cent, in addition to excise duty and compensation cess.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the health cess would create a "dedicated and predictable resource stream" for health and national security.

The compensation cess, introduced with GST in 2017 to offset states' revenue losses, will cease after repayment of a Rs 2.69 lakh crore loan by 31 January, 2026. *—PTI*

Tobacco firms must install CCTVs, keep footage for 2 yrs

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Manufacturers of chewing tobacco, gutkha and similar products must install a CCTV system from 1 February, covering all packing machines and preserve the footage for at least 24 months, says a government notification published Thursday.

The manufacturers will also have to disclose to excise authorities the number of machines and their capacities, and can also abate excise duty in case a machine is non-functional for 15 consecutive days, according to the Chewing Tobacco, Jarda Scented Tobacco and Gutkha Packing Machines Rules notified by the Finance Ministry.

The Rules will apply to manufacturers who pack such goods in pouches.

Every manufacturer operating a packing machine is required to install a CCTV system covering all packing machine areas and must preserve the footage for at least 24 months.

Manufacturers of tobacco products packed in pouches will have to disclose the number of machines, the specifications of the machines, such as maximum rated capacity and gearbox ratios, and the details of retail sale prices. *— PTI*

Rupee trades in red on 1st day of New Year

MUMBAI, 1 JAN

- INR declined on the first day of the year, after a 5 per cent slump in 2025. The stock market also ended the first trading session of 2026 on a flat note.

The rupee depreciated 10 paise to close at 89.98 against the US dollar on Thursday, the first trading session of 2026, as sustained foreign fund outflows and a negative trend in domestic equities dented investor sentiments.

Forex traders said the USD/INR pair traded in a tight range, as support from easing crude oil prices was offset by a positive tone in the US dollar index and foreign fund outflows.

The Indian rupee declined on the first day of the year, after registering a 5 per cent slump in 2025, as significant fund outflows kept dollar demand elevated and the rupee under pressure.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 89.94 against the dollar, touched an intraday low of 89.99, and a high of 89.93.

On Wednesday, the rupee depreciated by 13 paise to close at 89.88 against the US dollar.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.09 per cent higher at 98.32.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 0.78 per cent higher at USD 60.85 per barrel in futures trade.

On the domestic equity market front, the stock market ended the first trading session of 2026 on a flat note. Sensex dipped 32 points to 85,188.60, while the Nifty was up 16.95 points to 26,146.55. *—PTI*

Gold starts 2026 strong, silver falls after big rally

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Gold prices began the new year on a strong note, rising by Rs 640 to Rs 1,38,340 per 10 grams in New Delhi, according to the All India Sarafa Association. This follows a previous close of Rs 1,37,700. In contrast, silver prices fell for the second consecutive day, declining Rs 1,600 to Rs 2,37,400 per kilogram, down from Rs 2,39,000. The precious metals had a remarkable 2025, with gold rising 73.45 per cent, while silver surged approximately 164 per cent.

Praveen Singh from Mirae Asset ShareKhan noted that international gold is expected to remain range-bound, influenced by macroeconomic factors, US Federal Reserve rates, and geopolitical tensions. Additionally, China's new silver export restrictions may impact global supply and bullion prices. *—PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

Sreekumar Pillai takes over as new Director of IGCAR

CHENNAI, 1 JAN

Sreekumar G Pillai on Thursday assumed charge as Director of the Indira Gandhi Center for Atomic Research (IGCAR), Kalpakkam, succeeding CG Karhadkar, who retired on 31December, 2025.

An official release said the leadership change would strengthen IGCAR's focus on advanced nuclear research in line with India's atomic energy goals. Pillai holds a B.Tech in Chemical Engineering from Calicut University and joined the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai, in 1990. During his 35-year career at BARC, he gained extensive experience in spent fuel reprocessing, radioactive waste management and back-end fuel cycle operations. He led key projects, including integrated reprocessing plants, and played a major role in safety reviews and high-value nuclear facilities. *—PTI*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

Power use up 7% in Dec as cold grips India

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

India's power consumption rose by nearly 7 per cent year-on-year to 138.39 billion units in December, driven by increased use of heating appliances amid severe cold in North India. Government data showed peak power demand met during the month climbed to 241.20 GW, up from 224.23 GW a year earlier. Experts attributed the rise to higher use of geysers and blowers as temperatures fell, particularly across northern states. Peak demand had earlier touched an all-time high of about 250 GW in May 2024, while the highest level this summer was 242.77 GW in June. The government estimates peak power demand could reach 277 GW during the summer of 2025. *—PTI*

'This was the smallest daily trading range recorded since September,' said Sudeep Shah, Head of Derivatives Research at SBI *PHOTO: ANI*

ITC drags stock market to close flat

MUMBAI, 1 JAN

- FMCG sector fell 2.96 per cent following the new excise duties announcement of on tobacco products, with Godfrey Phillips India plunging by 17.09 per cent. ITC shares plummeted by 9.69 per cent

Indian equity benchmark indices, Sensex and Nifty, ended the first trading session of 2026 on a flat note, affected by significant selling of ITC shares, capital outflows and low investor participation.

BSE Sensex dipped by 32 points, to close at 85,188.60, displaying a high of 85,451.70 and a low of 85,101.52, marking a fluctuation of 350.18 points.

Nifty saw a modest rise of 16.95 points, closing at 26,146.55. Analyst Aakash Shah noted, despite muted global cues, the Nifty-50 stayed above the key 26,100 level.

"This was the smallest daily trading range recorded since 17 September, 2025, reflecting indecision and limited participation from buyers and sellers," said Sudeep Shah, Head of Technical and Derivatives Research at SBI Securities.

ITC shares plummeted by 9.69 per cent, alongside declines from Bajaj Finance, Asian Paints, Bharat Electronics, and ICICI Bank.

In contrast, NTPC, Mahindra & Mahindra, and Larsen & Toubro made gains. Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Investments, highlighted sectoral movements: "Auto stocks gained on strong December sales, while value buying supported IT stocks."

The Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector suffered a 2.96 per cent drop following the announcement of new excise duties on tobacco products, with Godfrey Phillips India plunging by 17.09 per cent.

Foreign Institutional Investors sold equities worth Rs 3,597.38 crore on Wednesday while Domestic Institutional Investors purchased stocks worth Rs 6,759.64 crore. The rupee depreciated 10 paise to close at 89.98 against the US dollar. *—PTI*

ATF price cut by steep 7%, LPG rate are up Rs 111 per cylinder

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Aviation turbine fuel (ATF), or jet fuel, prices fell by 7.3 per cent on Thursday, while commercial LPG rates increased by Rs 111 per cylinder. ATF prices in Delhi were cut by Rs 7,353.75 per kl, or 7.3 per cent, to Rs 92,323.02 per kl, according to state-owned retailers.

Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum revise ATF and LPG prices on the first day of every month based on international benchmarks and the exchange rate. While oil prices have moderated over the past month, higher winter heating demand has pushed up LPG rates in global markets.

The latest ATF price reduction is expected to ease pressure on airlines, for which fuel accounts for nearly 40 per cent of operating costs. The cut comes after three consecutive monthly increases since October, including a 5.4 per cent hike in December and a 3.3 per cent rise in October. The Thursday cut offsets more than two-thirds of the cumulative price increase since 1 October.

Winter heating demand has pushed up LPG rates across global markets *PHOTO: ANI*

Meanwhile, the price of a 19 kg commercial LPG cylinder used by hotels and restaurants has sharply increased by Rs 111 to Rs 1,691.50 in Delhi, the highest level since June last year. Domestic LPG prices remained unchanged at Rs 853 per 14.2-kg cylinder, after a Rs 50 hike in April 2025.

Fuel prices vary by city due to local taxes. Petrol and diesel prices remain frozen; petrol currently costs Rs 94.72 per litre in Delhi and diesel Rs 87.62. *—PTI*

GST collections jump 6% in Dec to Rs 1.74 lakh cr

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Gross GST collections rose 6.1 per cent to over Rs 1.74 lakh crore in December 2025, due to slow revenue growth from domestic sales after tax cuts.

GST revenue in December 2024 was Rs 1.64 lakh crore.

Gross revenue from domestic transactions rose 1.2 per cent to over Rs 1.22 lakh crore. Revenue from imported goods rose 19.7 per cent at Rs 51,977 crore during December 2025.

Refunds were up 31 per cent to Rs 28,980 crore in December.

Net GST revenues (after adjusting refunds) stood at over Rs 1.45 lakh crore, up 2.2 per cent year-on-year.

Cess collection last month dipped to Rs 4,238 crore, against the Rs 12,003 crore collected in December 2024.

Effective September 2025, GST rates on 375 items were slashed, lowering prices. Also, a compensation cess levy on tobacco and related products, as against demerit goods earlier.

Lower GST rates have impacted revenue. *—PTI*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

BANKS ALLOWED TO SET UP PENSION FUNDS FOR NPS

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

In a major policy shift announced Thursday, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) approved reforms to strengthen the National Pension System (NPS). The board will now allow Scheduled Commercial Banks to singly set up pension funds to manage NPS.

Previous regulations had limited banks' participation in pension sponsorship. The Ministry of Finance said the move aims to strengthen the pension ecosystem by boosting competition and aligning norms with the Reserve Bank of India. The new framework sets eligibility based on net worth, market capitalisation, and prudential soundness, with PFRDA noting that detailed norms will be notified separately and apply to both new and existing pension funds.

PFRDA has also revised the Investment Management Fee (IMF) structure for Pension Funds, effective 1 April, 2026. The revised slab-based IMF introduces differentiated rates for government and non-government subscribers, offering lower fees at higher AUM for the non-government segment. Charges for government sector employees under select schemes will remain unchanged.

Meanwhile, the Annual Regulatory Fee payable to PFRDA has been retained at 0.015 per cent of AUM, with a portion allocated to the Association of NPS Intermediaries to support financial literacy, aimed at strengthening old-age income security. *—ANI*

NO APP REQUIRED

BSNL launches WiFi calling across India

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

PHOTO: X

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) announced the nationwide rollout of its Voice over WiFi (VoWiFi) service, also known as Wi-Fi Calling on 1 January.

This service is now available to all BSNL customers in all telecom circles, ensuring seamless, high-quality connectivity even in challenging environments, the Union Ministry of Communications said in a statement on Thursday.

VoWiFi enables customers to make and receive voice calls and messages over a Wi-Fi network, ensuring clear connectivity in areas with weak mobile phone signals.

VoWiFi is an IMS-based service that supports seamless handovers between Wi-Fi and mobile networks.

Calls are made using the customer's mobile number and phone dialler, without third-party applications.

The service is useful in areas where mobile coverage is limited, provided a stable Wi-Fi connection is available.

VoWiFi also helps reduce network congestion and is offered free of cost, with no additional charges for Wi-Fi calls.

VoWiFi is supported on most modern smartphones. Customers have to only enable Wi-Fi Calling in their handset settings. Customers should visit the nearest BSNL customer service centre or contact the BSNL helpline 18001503 to know about device compatibility. *—ANI*

Ola Electric market share rose to almost 12% in Dec

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Ola Electric has reported 9,020 vehicle registrations this December, with market shares rising 2.1 per cent in November. Ola's market share in the second half of December rose to nearly 12 per cent.

The company credited its performance to their customer care programme, Hyperservice. After service bottlenecks amid rapid scale-up, Ola Electric initiated Hyperservice to address backlog resolution.

Ola Electric Chairman Bhavish Aggarwal said early signs show improving demand, with 4,680-cell vehicle rollouts and upcoming BESS deliveries strengthening near-term execution and long-term technology plans.

The company reported faster service, with 77 per cent of requests completed same day in December.

Driven by market share gains and demand boost in December, Ola Electric has reclaimed its position in the top three EV players in nearly a dozen states, including Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Punjab and Haryana.

In December 2025, the company received government certification for its 4680 Bharat Cell-powered Roadster X+ Motorcycle, extending across scooters and motorcycles and launching in-house cell integration. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

PL 2026: Rodri set to return to Manchester City

MADRID, 1 JAN

Manchester City midfielder Rodri is fit to return following a hamstring injury as the club looks to keep up the pressure on Premier League leader Arsenal at Sunderland on Thursday, manager Pep Guardiola said. Winger Jeremy Doku, out for nearly three weeks with a leg injury, may also feature as City seeks its ninth straight win in all competitions, Guardiola told reporters on Wednesday. Rodri has come back. Maybe he can play for a few minutes. We need it desperately. Doku, maybe," said Guardiola, whose team trails Arsenal by five points. John Stones and Oscar Bobb are not yet fit to return."We had seven or eight injured players and two at the Africa Cup of Nations. Five players injured are coming back a little bit.—*PTI*

X/@CHELSEA

Enzo leaves Chelsea after club holds crisis talks

LONDON, 1 JAN

Enzo Maresca is on the brink of leaving Chelsea after a complete breakdown in his relationship with the club. The situation around the head coach has been unpredictable for weeks, and a parting of the ways is likely expected to take place on Thursday. Chelsea is set to open the new year by holding emergency talks over Maresca's position. It is expected that the Italian, who was booed by supporters during the disappointing 2-2 draw with Bournemouth at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday, will not be in charge for Sunday's trip to Manchester City. Sources have indicated that Maresca wants to leave the club, but it is unclear if he is willing to walk away without a payoff.—*PTI*

PHOTO: X/@AC

Emilio Nsue scores first 'legal' goal at Africa Cup

RABAT, 1 JAN

Emilio Nsue scored a contender for goal of the tournament in his first legal start at the Africa Cup of Nations after an 11-year ineligible career with Equatorial Guinea. The 36-year-old Nsue was the top scorer with five goals at the last edition of the tournament, but FIFA in 2024 ruled that he was never eligible to play for Equatorial Guinea, and it banned him from playing for the national team for six months. Nsue was finally cleared to play in March this year. Nsue had an injury going to the Africa Cup and missed his team's opening 2-1 loss to Burkina Faso before going on as a substitute in the 1-0 defeat to Sudan.—*PTI*

Joshua released from hospital after road crash

NIGERIA, 1 JAN

British boxer Anthony Joshua has been released from the hospital, Nigerian authorities said late on Wednesday night. The two-time former heavyweight champion and Olympic gold medallist was involved in a fatal road crash near Lagos on Monday, which killed two of his close associates and team members. Joshua had been under "observation" at Lagoon Hospital in Lagos while recovering from minor injuries, promoter Eddie Hearn's Matchroom Boxing said on Monday. The Lagos state commissioner for information, Gbenga, said in a statement on X that Joshua was discharged late on Wednesday afternoon after being deemed clinically fit to recuperate from home.—*PTI*

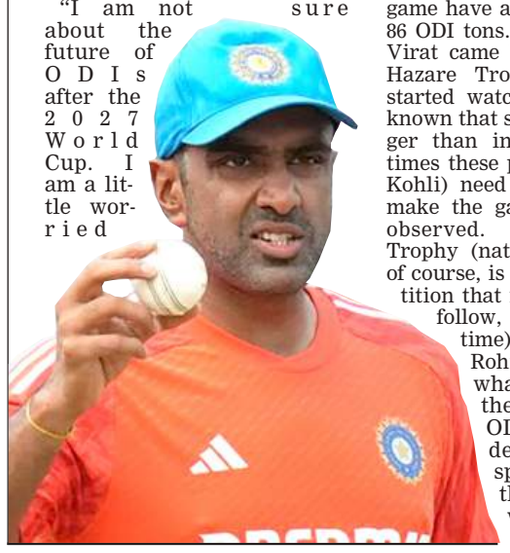
Worried about future of ODIs after 2027 WC: Ashwin

ODIs have become all but redundant due to T20 leagues

CHENNAI, 1 JAN

Skeptical about the future of ODIs after the 2027 World Cup, former India spinner Ravichandran Ashwin on Thursday says that the format has lost its space to mushrooming T20 leagues and an "overkill" of cricket caused by ICC's push for a marquee event every year.

Ashwin believes **ODIs have become all but redundant due to T20 leagues** and the pride of place that Test cricket continues to enjoy.



"I am not sure about the future of ODIs after the 2027 World Cup. I am a little worried about it. Of course, I am following the Vijay Hazare Trophy, but the manner in which I followed SMAT (Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 Trophy), I am finding it slightly difficult to follow (Vijay Hazare)," Ashwin said on his YouTube channel 'Ash Ki Baat'.

"Also, we need to know what the audience wants to watch. I feel Test cricket still has space, but ODI cricket, I truly feel, doesn't have the space," said Ashwin in a no-holds-barred assessment.

The bona fide greats of the game have a combined total of 86 ODI tons. "Look, Rohit and Virat came back to the Vijay Hazare Trophy, and people started watching it. We have known that sport is always bigger than individuals, but at times these players (Rohit and Kohli) need to come back to make the game relevant," he observed. "Vijay Hazare Trophy (national one-dayers), of course, is a domestic competition that not a lot of people follow, but they did (this time) because Virat and Rohit were playing... what happens when they stop playing ODIs?" he wondered. Ashwin spoke about how the ODI cricket was once an amazing format. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

NZ ODIS: WILL SELECTORS DROP PANT?

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Rishabh Pant's form in the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy has been patchy with just one half-century in four matches, but if he is dropped for the upcoming New Zealand series without being given even one ODI game in the last 18 months, it could be deemed as slightly harsh from the Ajit Agarkar-led committee.The Indian selectors will be announcing the team for the three-match ODI series against the Black Caps, starting January 11 in Vadodara, and there have been speculations about whether Pant can hold on to his place in the squad.It is an open secret that at least one member in the Indian team management doesn't exactly like Pant's high-risk, high-reward batting template and would like him to employ a more traditional way of batting. —*PTI*

AUS VS ENG 5TH TEST

Australia announces unchanged 15-member squad

SYDNEY, 1 JAN

Australia has announced an unchanged 15-member squad for the fifth and final Ashes Test against England, set to begin in Sydney on Sunday.

Captain Steve Smith and the rest of the group had their first training session at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Thursday.

Australia leads the series 3-1. The host won the first two Tests in Perth and Brisbane by the same margin - eight wickets. The side triumphed by 82 runs in the third fixture in Adelaide to retain the Ashes.

Usman Khawaja retained in Australia's squad

Cummins missed the first two Tests against England due to a lower back injury but returned for the Adelaide Oval Test. However, he will be rested for the remainder of the series.

Khawaja started as Australia's opener in this series but suffered from back spasms during the Perth Test's second innings and missed the Brisbane Test.

Murphy ready for England to attack in Sydney Test

T20 WORLD CUP

Australia names a spin-heavy squad of 15 players for Sri Lanka and India

- Australia squad: Mitchell Marsh (captain), Xavier Bartlett, Cooper Connolly, Pat Cummins, Tim David, Cameron Green, Nathan Ellis, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Glenn Maxwell, Matthew Short, Marcus Stoinis, Adam Zampa

Off-spinner Murphy, 25, could play at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) after Nathan Lyon was ruled out of the series with a hamstring injury.

Murphy played two matches in the 2023 Ashes and came in for some particularly tough treatment in the third Test at Headingley, but still ended up with seven wickets in the series at a better average and strike rate than the rest of the Australia team.

Smith (c), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Brendan, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Todd Murphy, Michael Neser, Richardson, Starc, Jake Weatherald. —*PTI*

No participation fee by AIFF among conditions from clubs for ISL restart

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Thirteen of the 14 Indian Super League (ISL) clubs on Thursday told All India Football Federation (AIFF) that they "may be ready and willing" to take part in the delayed 2025-26 season if there is no participation fee and the national body takes financial responsibility for the organisational and operational costs of running the truncated competition.

Putting conditions on their participation in the ISL, the clubs also requested the national federation to furnish "a clear, time-bound roadmap for execution of the long-term plan, including defined timelines for appointment of a commercial partner and/or broadcaster, finalisation of the league's revenue, governance, and risk-sharing framework, and transition to a financially self-sustaining competition model consistent with statutory governance norms".

PHOTO: SALAR

"Upon receipt of the above confirmations, the undersigned clubs shall be in a position to formally confirm participation and cooperate fully with the AIFF to ensure the orderly, compliant, and successful conduct of the 2025–26 season," a letter from the 13 clubs to the AIFF said.

The letter was in response to the AIFF's missive on Wednesday, asking the clubs to confirm within a day their participation in the delayed ISL and the proposed format. Thursday's letter was written by Sporting Club Delhi CEO Dhruv Sood on behalf of 13 ISL clubs.

The clubs are Mohun Bagan Super Giant, East Bengal, Kerala Blasters, FC Goa, Sporting Club Delhi, Bengaluru FC, Mumbai City FC, Chennaiyin FC, Mohammedan Sporting, Punjab FC, Inter Kashi, North East United FC, and Odisha FC. Jamshedpur FC were not represented.—*PTI*

TARGET OLYMPIC PODIUM SCHEME

Dope-tainted Reetika dropped; compound archers in core grp

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Dope-tainted wrestler Reetika Hooda on Thursday was dropped, compound archers like Parneet Kaur and Abhishek Verma were promoted to the core group, while decathlete Tejaswin Shanker found a place in the developmental list of the updated directory of athletes supported by the Sports Ministry's flagship Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS).

The list was drastically pruned from 179 to 94 last year, marking the end of the 2024 Paris Olympics cycle. But it has been redrawn to reflect the performances of the past year.

The number of core group athletes has now gone up marginally to 118, comprising 57 able-bodied and 61 para-athletes. Hooda, an Asian Championships medallist who competed in Paris, failed a dope test during a selection trial in July last year. She was a part of the TOPS core group released in February last year.

Parneet Kaur, Abhishek Verma and Dope-tainted wrestler Reetika Hooda PHOTO: PTI

"She has been dropped now," a Sports Authority of India (SAI) source told PTI when asked about Hooda's status.

However, World Para Athletics Championship gold-winning sprinter Simran, whose guide Umar Saifi flunked a dope test in October last, has been retained in the core group. —*PTI*

10 countries to take part in WTT Feeder Series

VADODARA, 1 JAN

Around 334 players from 10 countries will vie for honours at the WTT Youth Contender and the WTT Feeder Series, scheduled to begin at the Sama Indoor Sports Complex here on Friday.

The second edition of the WTT Youth Contender, featuring U-11 to U-19 categories, will be held from 2 to 5 January, followed by the WTT Feeder Series from 7 to 11 January.

The Youth Contender will see participation from 226 players representing four countries, while the Feeder Series will feature 108 players from 10 nations.

The Youth Contender will begin with the U-13 and U-17 singles events on Friday, with competitions in the U-11, U-15 and U-19 categories scheduled for 4 and 5 January.

India had dominated the WTT Youth Contenders last year, with Ankur Bhattacharjee and Syndrela Das clinching the U-19 boys' and girls' singles titles respectively.Divyanshi Bhowmick won both the U-15 and U-17 girls' singles crowns.

Divyanshi will compete in the U-17 and U-19 categories this year, while Syndrela will aim to defend her U-19 girls' singles title. —*PTI*

Defiant Kramnik sues FIDE for defamation in Swiss civil court

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Russian chess great Vladimir Kramnik has sued world chess governing body FIDE for defamation in a Swiss civil court after he became the subject of an inquiry for allegedly harassing players with "unsubstantiated" cheating claims following the death of American Grandmaster Daniel Naroditsky.

Kramnik posted on 'X' that he has been forced to take the legal route after being relentlessly attacked by fellow players and FIDE, whose CEO Emil Sutovsky described Kramnik's allegations of cheating against Naroditsky as "appalling and outright shameful.

The exact cause of 29-year-old Naroditsky's death is not known, but in his last livestream, he talked about being under immense mental stress over the allegations levelled by Kramnik.

Czech Grandmaster David Navara has also claimed to have felt distressed and suicidal due to Kramnik's online cheating charge against him. The defiant Russian has, however, maintained that he has not spoken without basis.

"I have initiated formal legal proceedings against FIDE in accordance with Swiss law in the Court of Lausanne. Under the applicable Swiss procedural rules, an obligatory preliminary procedure must first take place. This phase typically lasts 2-3 months," the former world champion said.

"Additionally, a formal request for the preservation of evidence has been personally delivered to the FIDE headquarters today," he added. —*PTI*

Nicholas Lee set to take over as conditioning coach

NEW DELHI, 1 JAN

Englishman Nicholas Lee will take over as the new strength and conditioning coach of the Indian women's cricket team after the conclusion of the Women's Premier League.

The five-team Women's Premier League is scheduled to be held from 9 January to 5 February in Navi Mumbai and Vadodara.

"Lee will take over as the new strength and conditioning coach of the Indian women's cricket team after the WPL," a source told PTI on Thursday.

Following the WPL, India is slated to tour Australia for a multi-format series from 15 February to 9 March. —*PTI*

INJURY STRUGGLES IN 2025

Tsitsipas considered retiring from tennis

WASHINGTON, 1 JAN

Stefanos Tsitsipas said on Thursday he seriously considered retiring from tennis in the depths of a struggle with serious back pain during much of the 2025 season. But the former world number three, now ranked 36th after playing just two Davis Cup matches since a second-round exit at the U.S. Open, said his ongoing medical treatment appeared to be paying dividends.

"I'm most excited to see how my actual training responds to my back," the 27-year-old said as he prepared to open his 2026 campaign for Greece at the mixed-teams United Cup in Perth, Australia.

"My biggest concern was if I could finish a match," added the 2023 Australian Open finalist, who said the injury haunted him "for the last six or eight months.

"I got really scared after the U.S. Open loss (to Germany's Daniel Altmaier). I could not walk for two days. That's when you reconsider the future of your career."

Tsitsipas said that after various medical consultations, he was now satisfied with his current care plan.

"My biggest win for 2026 would be to not have to worry about finishing matches," he said, adding that he completed five weeks of off-season training without pain.

Aryna Sabalenka wants rematch and revenge against Nick Kyrgios

World number one Aryna Sabalenka on Thursday said she wants a rematch of her "Battle of the Sexes" showdown with Nick Kyrgios so she can get revenge. Australia's Kyrgios beat the Belarusian 6-3, 6-3 in a highly publicised showdown in Dubai last Sunday, with modified rules that divided fans.

Sabalenka's side of the court was reduced in size by nine percent in an attempt to restrict Kyrgios' power and speed advantage, while each player only received one serve. —*PTI*

Osaka drawing inspiration from family at United Cup

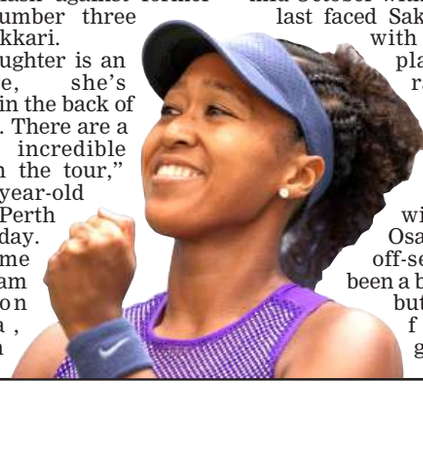
SYDNEY, 1 JAN

An excited Naomi Osaka will lean on family ties as she leads Japan in Friday's opening day at the United Cup in Australia, kicking off her season with a testing clash against former world number three Maria Sakkari.

"My daughter is an incentive, she's (always) in the back of my mind. There are a lot of incredible moms on the tour," the 28-year-old said in Perth on Thursday.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Osaka, who won Australian Open titles in 2019 and 2021, said she was taking inspiration from her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Shai as she began the new year.

The 16th-ranked Osaka, who ended her 2025 season in mid-October with a leg injury, last faced Sakkari in 2021 with the Greek player, now ranked 52nd, dropping just four games in a resounding quarter-final win in Miami.



Osaka said her off-season had been a balancing act, but that she was feeling good. —*PTI*